Man and Message

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A Guide to Meaning-based Text Analysis

by Kathleen Callow

This book is dedicated to two Johns:

to John Beekman

without whose insight and stimulus

it would never have been started

and to John Callow

without whose input and constant encouragement

it would certainly never have been finished.

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FOREWORD

The author’s goal in writing this book has been to present “in homespun language” the full picture of how a skilled linguist can examine a linguistic text and talk relevantly about how it was put together, what it means, and what it’s for. This goal has been beautifully achieved, in a work that leads the unsuspecting reader painlessly through most of the basic concepts of linguistic semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and the grammar-meaning and grammar-use interfaces.

Kathleen Callow’s linguistic career is strongly grounded in translation, a field in which one has to care about how well an original author’s intentions are met in the interpretation created by readers of the translation. Because of this background, her way of teaching us how to talk about language emphasizes what a text communicates to its audience, how an audience needs to be prepared for a message, what devices different languages have for expressing meanings and evoking the audience’s knowledge, and how these devices interact to make it possible for the meaning of a text to be built on the meanings of its components.

If you have chosen Man and Message for a week’s reading in an isolated mountain cabin, you should first do some preparation. Somewhere in the middle of your experience with this book you will want to have access to a large writing pad, a package of colored pencils and a collection of texts to play with—restaurant reviews, political speeches, advertisements, jokes, folk tales, recipes, legal statutes, whatever. This is not because the author hasn’t provided you with a large enough sample of meticulously analyzed and annotated texts, but because you will feel the urge to try your hand at doing what she does on some of your own material: blocking out structures and substructures, identifying topics and themes, plotting semantic and rhetorical relations from segment to segment, spotting the message sender’s purposes and background assumptions. For this book does not just describe how linguistic messages are put together, and what they are used for, but it is a kind of “How To” book that guides the reader through the process of carefully examining linguistic texts for what can be found in them.

The two-part title, Man and Message, points to a central motif of this work: it is human beings who produce linguistic texts, and a message succeeds when its receiver is able to know what its sender intended. As human beings, the communicators are members of a culture and have interests, experiences and knowledge that can be deployed in packaging the message. Among the things that we, as students of language, need to discover are the ways in which the grammar and vocabulary of a language, and the communicative practices of its speakers, may be shaped to exploit and exhibit the communicators’ shared experience, both in terms of the general cultural background and in terms of the moment-by-moment experience of interpreting the message. (Her emphasis on language in use is even revealed in example sentences that are introduced to illustrate minor grammatical points. Instead of the linguist’s usual “the boy hit the ball” or “the farmer kills the duckling,” we find sentences that real people might have uttered, in settings of family life, play, or work.)

The analytic methods presented in this book are illustrated for the written language, but they are equally usable for speech. The demonstrations are with English, because that is the language she shares with her readers, but the frequent comparisons with the more “exotic” languages that she has immersed herself in make it clear that the same techniques can be used with any language. The descriptive apparatus of the book does not presuppose prior knowledge of the technical language of linguistics, but this does not mean the book is necessarily for beginners: it presents the Big Picture in ways that most specialist treatises cannot.

This book will be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of students of language who choose to study man’s use of language as embedded in the activities of being human.

Charles J. Fillmore

University of California at Berkeley

PREFACE

This book has its origins in the mountains of Mexico, where a young American, John Beekman, went with his wife and family to live among the Chol Indians in order to translate the New Testament into their highly complex language. He was a pioneer in more ways than one. Bible translation was at that time emerging from well-meant literalism into something much more communicative, but it still lacked any theoretical framework to support the new approach. These were uncharted waters, and the young translator had unwittingly embarked on a very long voyage.

It was some years later that my husband and I met him, now running a workshop centre on the high plateau north of Mexico City and training his colleagues to apply the principles which had made the Chol translation conspicuously successful. Collaboration followed. Lecture notes evolved into a textbook on translation (Beekman and Callow 1974), which was to be followed some years later by Larson’s Meaning-based Translation developing the same approach. But there was still something missing. Meaningful translation needs a theory of meaning at its heart, and although translators were becoming more confident and translations more effective, theory still lagged far behind practice. Many were the eager discussions in John’s study, first in Mexico and later in Texas, when translators from different parts of the world met to discuss the issues involved.

Once more lecture notes began to circulate, this time under the title The Semantic Structure of Written Communication (Beekman, Callow and Kopesec, 1981, ms.). While this was still in tentative form, John Beekman died, to our loss but to his great gain. Not only an original and perceptive thinker, he was also a Christian of robust faith and character: his life challenged and blessed us. The present volume attempts, a generation on, to accomplish the task which he set himself so many years ago.

This brief history has been necessary in order to disabuse the reader of some false expectations. Theories of meaning are expected to arise from the library or the laboratory, as a distillation of the work of previous thinkers. The theory presented here arises primarily from years in the exacting world of translation, from the felt need for a theory which would undergird good translations and reveal the deficiencies of bad ones. Every suggested theoretical development (and many were rejected along the way) had to stand firm under the pressures of actual language use. Neither the library nor the laboratory were neglected, but each had to stand the practical test of usefulness to translators. Of recent years I have been delighted to discover an increasing number of linguists thinking cognitively and practically: many of them came on the scene too late to influence this book, but such a convergence of minds has encouraged me greatly.

Concerning the linguistics of the laboratory I am respectfully cautious. A few years ago I had occasion to visit two of our British universities within the space of a few days. At each I found linguists claiming laboratory proof of their opposing theories of communication, one that we process words singly and the other that we process them in groups. As a translator I was convinced that both types of processing occur; I was troubled not by the results of these experiments, but by the tacit assumptions of all concerned that only one of these claims could be true, and that what was true under laboratory conditions must ipso facto be true in life. I readily allow that the results of careful experimentation are valid under the conditions of the experiment, but I strongly resist the claim that these results (and worse, only these results) are necessarily true of normal communication. The laboratory situation is usually narrowed down to one test factor: in normal communication the mind is buzzing with many simultaneous factors. Extrapolation from the laboratory to life must be made with great care, life being the final arbiter of applicability.

Another widespread assumption with which I take issue is that anything really important requires a learned meta-language for its expression. As a Bible translator I am aware that, on the contrary, great truths can be very simply expressed. So I have tried in this book to express linguistic truths simply and without resort to too many opaque polysyllables. Where technical shorthands have seemed necessary I have tried to root them in life rather than in abstract definitions, so that they may be accessible to anyone interested in the study of meaning, whether trained linguist or not. For those who prefer a more technical presentation, the same theory can be found in condensed form in Mann and Thompson (eds), 1992, 5–37.

In the light of my intended readership, I make no apology for abjuring footnotes and banishing bibliographical and theoretical notes to the ends of chapters: when exploring unfamiliar terrain, the fewer distractions the better. In any case, vast bibliographies are daunting. I have been selective, suggesting only such further reading as will provide a pathway for the beginner into standard linguistic works. With the same audience in mind I have selected only English texts to illustrate Part 2, although this analytical approach was first worked out on New Testament Greek, and it has since been applied in the classroom to a wide variety of languages. I hope that readers will use the approach presented here in the analysis of their own first language, and that in so doing they will extend the theory beyond the limits of this present volume.

A word on the title may be in order. Throughout its formative years this book was known to my students as Man and Message, an easily remembered title chosen to reflect the two parts of the book. When it was suggested that some might find this offensive I settled for Meaning-based Text Analysis, but this title proved much less memorable. I had, moreover, an uneasy feeling that I had taken the coward’s way out. I personally have no objection to using the word ‘man’ generically: should I then, as a member of the silent majority, surrender my convictions for the sake of a pressure group? Likewise, should I give up the normal use of pronouns and adopt that unnatural innovation, s/he? I decided rather to write in normal English, regretful if I cause offence, but claiming the freedom of speech which I value no less than do my potential critics.

After a lifetime in linguistics, it is impossible to recall my many debts. From Kenneth L. Pike I learnt a hearty respect for hierarchy and a delight in the patternedness of language. I learnt prosodies in the Firthian school in London, and absorbed much, including a strong emphasis on context, from M. A. K. Halliday and the systemic school. My indebtedness to J. R. Searle will be apparent, especially in chapters 3 and 5. I owe a multiple debt to Charles Fillmore: for his pioneering work on case relations, for constructive comments on an earlier version of this book, for his generosity in writing the Foreword, and not least for a lecture he once gave in Mexico, in which he pleaded with members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics to write in simple, comprehensible language. I have tried to comply.

Other debts are less specific but no less real: to Ellis Deibler, Ilah Fleming, Mike Kopesec, Bob Longacre and John Tuggy, all of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, for their friendship and for many fruitful discussions; to Dr. Marcel Thelen and Professor Mary Snell-Hornby for showing me that secular translators face problems essentially the same as those I face in the biblical field; to Dr. Jan Nuyts for his recent works stressing the need for a cognitive, pre-verbal meaning base, which have encouraged me as I have pursued the same goal.

The translation department at the International Linguistics Center in Dallas, Texas, U.S.A., has a special place in my heart and claim on my gratitude. John Beekman’s successors, Dr. Millie Larson and Dr. Katy Barnwell, have been constant in their patience and encouragement. Dick Blight and his wife Faith have superintended a prolonged keyboarding and production process. Betty Eastman has laboured meticulously on copy editing, and almost the entire department has at some point been involved in keyboarding, proofreading or reviewing. My thanks go to John and June Austing, Elaine Beekman, Bob Smith, Virginia Velie and John Werner, and my apologies to any other members of the team whose names time has removed from my none-too-retentive memory. Their co-labours with me have lasted more years than any of us expected, since the classroom and the kitchen have frequently taken precedence over the pen: I am grateful for their fellowship and support. Final revisions were made in England, and I am grateful to Muriel Parker for keyboarding these with competence and cheerfulness, to Cathie Jackson, Elizabeth Storkey and Patsy Wheeler for bibliographical assistance, and to my sister Eileen for her careful proofreading of the entire text. I am indebted also to Simon Gardner, who willingly undertook the task of preparing the index.

Finally, it is not easy for a wife and mother, whose work often takes her to different corners of the globe, to find suitable conditions in which to read, think and write. I extend my thanks to Virginia Butler, Frank and Margaret Salussolia and Simon Wright who, when my own home afforded no discernible corner of quietness, generously gave me the keys to their own front doors. Part 1 was first drafted in a cottage in Wales, where a much-loved friend who prefers to be nameless is always available to anyone in need. A similar spirit motivates friends from student days, Dr. John Hay and his wife Fay, whose home in the Outer Isles of Scotland is equally welcoming: looking out on loch and mountain, I drafted Part 2.

It is, I believe, customary to thank one’s long-suffering family. My children lived their teenage years in the shadow of ‘the book,’ but since I always put it aside when they came home from school, I do not think that their sufferings were severe. No words can express my gratitude to my husband, so I will not even make the attempt.

PART ONE

Man, the Message Sender

1

MEANINGS AND HOW WE EXPRESS THEM

1.1 Meanings and their expressions closely intertwined

1.2 Meanings and their expressions necessarily distinguished

1.2.1 How single words relate to meanings

1.2.2 How words combine to convey meanings

1.2.3 Further complications in grouping words

1.2.4 A different approach to the problem

1.3 What is left of meanings if we take away the words?

1.3.1 The separability of the signal and the thing signalled

1.3.2 Thought not always verbal

1.3.3 The preverbal substrate of verbal thoughts

1.3.4 Multiple expressions of the same meaning

1.4 So what is meaning?

Some of the most remarkable events in this world pass unnoticed because they occur so frequently. It should by any standard be considered remarkable that human beings can communicate their inward thoughts to each other at all, other than by facial expression and gestures. After all, any given language uses a very restricted range of sounds, whereas the number of meanings that people communicate is infinite. Yet, with a range of between twenty and forty distinctive sounds available to them, people communicate this infinity of meaning effortlessly, constantly, and completely, heedless of the magnitude of their achievement. In this book, we want to take a very close look at this extraordinary phenomenon of communicated meaning.

1.1 Meanings and their expressions closely intertwined

The first thing that must engage our attention is the sheer power of association between the streams of sound that we utter and the meanings those sounds express. The sounds, of course, are built up into recurring and identifiable patterns, into words and sentences, into conversations and speeches. But so closely are the sound patterns associated with their attendant meanings that we have great difficulty in disentangling the two.

When we want to communicate our thoughts to someone else, we do not consciously select the sound sequences needed to convey those thoughts. We don’t work through a complicated linguistic process involving consonants and vowels and tenses and pronouns and intonation: we just say it. We think of it, and we say it. Cascades of sound clothe the meanings that we communicate, and we are scarcely aware of them. Our attention is on what we are meaning, not on how we are expressing it. These two elements in communication, the meaning and its expression, are correlated in our minds at such a deep level of automaticity that they seem to be inseparable companions. We think the thought, and the words rise unbidden to our lips.

The same inescapable association is operative in the other direction also. When someone else is communicating his or her thoughts to us, we are virtually unaware of the stream of sounds: we hear the meanings. Indeed, it is almost impossible for us to detach the one from the other. If someone says to us, “I’m thirsty,” or “Please pass the salt,” it requires much training and intense concentration to be aware simply of speech sounds and not of meanings. We cannot even see a written headline in a newspaper without at the same instant taking in its meaning. Meanings and expressions are indissolubly united, but our focus of attention in all circumstances is on meanings.

1.2 Meanings and their expressions necessarily distinguished

The compelling force of the association between meanings and their expressions can blind us to the fact that the relationship between the two is by no means straightforward. We have a naive assumption that things in the world around us each have a word attached and that when we are talking about those things we string the appropriate words together: the listener hears the words, and the associated objects march in order across some kind of television screen in his mind. But this simplistic approach doesn’t match up with the facts. There is no one-to-one correspondence between words and things, nor is there any television screen.

Let us consider a little further the relationship between meanings and their expressions. If I were to say, “There’s a boat riding at anchor in the loch,” undoubtedly the words “boat” and “anchor” and “loch” could be considered to have some kind of semipictorial correlate in the mind. But what flickers across the television screen when “there’s” and “a” and “at” strike the eardrum? These words don’t seem to have a meaning in quite the direct way that “boat” and “anchor” do. Yet they are words, and essential to the communication of what I mean. But if there are words that do not correlate with any one meaning, then there can be no one-to-one correspondence between meaning and its verbal expression. Some words don’t have any counterpart on the television screen at all.

1.2.1 How single words relate to meanings

Other words, however, seem to have too many meanings. “Head,” for instance, means part of the human body or of an animal body. But we can also talk about a head of cauliflower or a head of steam. We can talk about the head of a valley, but not in quite the same way as we talk about the head of a firm or the head of an axe. Most persons and objects have only one head each, but sermons and arguments have several. The single word “head” seems to correlate with all these different meanings.

Or take the word “lift.” We can lift a suitcase down from the rack, but we can also lift a ban, lift someone’s spirits, lift our voices, or refuse to lift a finger. Fogs lift, although nobody apparently lifts them. If we had to restate these meanings in other words, we could not use the same equivalent expression each time. To lift a ban is to declare that it is no longer operative, but if we lift our voices they are quite vigorously operative. As with “head,” one word correlates with several different meanings.

So we will have to modify our original untutored assumption that each word in a language comes to us bundled up, as it were, with its own unique meaning. Some words are bundled up with numerous meanings, while other words seem rather to be floating around looking for a meaning to attach themselves to—hardly a satisfactory situation from which to launch a serious study of communication.

There is a further complicating factor in the study of the relation between meaning and its expression. We have just seen that one word can correlate with several different meanings. It is equally true that one meaning can be expressed in several different ways. If I am describing a situation in which I was very frightened, I can say, “I was terrified,” “I was petrified,” or “I was scared stiff.” The meaning conveyed is the same, but there is a choice of verbal forms to use in signalling that meaning. Here it is not a word that is bundled together with several meanings, but one meaning that is bundled together with several possible expressions. Once more, in a different way, the assumed one-to-one correspondence between words and thoughts has broken down.

1.2.2 How words combine to convey meanings

The combining of words to convey more complex meanings is not done in any haphazard way, but according to the familiar grammatical patterns of the language. In English, for example, word order is grammatically important. Thus, “Mary graduated a year before Tim” and “Tim graduated a year before Mary” mean very different things although the words used are exactly the same. It is the grammar that signals the difference in meaning. Similarly the command “Buy the children chocolate every day” and the statement “The children buy chocolate every day” use the same words to convey different meanings. Each language combines words in its own way to convey the desired meaning.

But the communication of meaning is not simply a matter of selecting the right words from a mental lexicon and combining them in ways provided by the grammar. There are further complications which must be handled.

Sometimes, for instance, what seems like the same grammatical construction can convey different meanings. If I say, “I found the car keys by the porch door,” I mean that the missing keys were located near the porch door. But if I say, “I found them by the light from the street lamp,” or “I found them by accident,” or “I found them by nightfall,” I am not referring to where I found them, but to how or when I did so. Adding words together in accepted patterns does not always yield the anticipated total of meaning.

Sometimes a simple grammatical change can alter the meaning of a word. Compare “The programme director liked their acting” with “the acting director liked their programme.” In the first sentence the word “acting” refers to people performing a play or sketch. But the acting director in the second sentence is not performing a play; he is temporarily taking on the duties and responsibilities of a director. The word “acting” means different things in different grammatical contexts.

We saw in the preceding section that different words (e.g., “frightened,” “scared,” “petrified”) can signal the same meaning. This is also true of combinations of words: one meaning can be communicated in a variety of different ways. The sportswriter reporting Saturday’s match in the local paper can say, “The home team beat them decisively” or “United won by a convincing margin” or “Our boys trounced them.” The three versions carry essentially the same meaning, although the verbal forms are different. It is even possible to change the grammatical construction used and at the same time maintain the original meaning, as can be seen in the headlines “Easy win for our lads” and “Visiting team routed.” Obviously a meaning expressed in so many ways cannot be tied in a word-by-word way to any one of its various expressions.

1.2.3 Further complications in grouping words

So far, we have spoken as if words were separate building blocks of meaning, combined in ways determined by the grammar. But sometimes the building blocks consist not of single words, but of tight-knit groups of words functioning as a unit. Consider the following examples: “She doesn’t want anything more to do with him,” “I advise you to leave well alone,” “He certainly has the courage of his convictions.” In each case the italicised words function as an interlocking whole to convey one total meaning.

Even more confusing situations arise when words are used to mean something they do not normally mean at all. When my children were running around barefoot in the African sun, I used to tell them to “pull their socks up”—to their great perplexity. We talk about people “pulling their weight” or “losing their grip” or “finding their feet” when they are not pulling or losing or finding anything. We can call these figures of speech and say that we are talking metaphorically, but what implication does this have for a theory that words are signals of meanings? Even words with apparently straightforward meanings such as “lose” and “find” turn out, on occasion, to be signalling something quite different.

We must, in the light of all this evidence, abandon any attempt to relate meanings to their expressions on a one-word-at-a-time basis. Single words do not signal single, identifiable meanings, nor do words added together combine to make a neat, tidy, and predictable total.

1.2.4 A different approach to the problem

But if one word at a time doesn’t work, what alternative approach are we to take? We will, in fact, be wrestling with this problem in several later chapters, especially chapters 5 and 6. Meantime we can say this much with confidence: first, verbal expressions do signal meanings, but in complex ways which we cannot yet account for; second, if we are to try to correlate meanings with their expressions we must first disentangle the two. We need some way of considering meanings independently of the forms that express them, of separating them off so that we can see exactly what is being signalled without the clutter and complication of verbal forms that do not correlate directly. Once we have done this, we will be in a much stronger position to study their relationship once more.

We should make it clear at this point that we have no intention of establishing some kind of “meaning in a vacuum” in order to study it. Nor are we interested in meanings as purely mental operations, going on in people’s heads whether they are saying anything or not. We are interested in communication, and the only kind of meaning that concerns us is the meaning someone tries to convey when he is communicating. But if the only meaning that concerns us is communicated meaning, how can we even mentally detach the meaning from the verbal forms that express it? We said earlier that meaning and expressions are inseparable companions and indissolubly united. How can we now separate the inseparable and dissolve the indissoluble?

1.3 What is left of meanings if we take away the words?

1.3.1 The separability of the signal and the thing signalled

The problem of separating the inseparable is simply a psychological one. We have for so long associated the verbal signal with the thing signalled that we mentally identify them. But it is purely an accident of linguistic history that we call our feline pets “cats” and our canine pets “dogs.” The name labels are totally arbitrary. Yet so great is the force of lifetime habit that we can scarcely imagine the possibility of the labels being the other way round. The signal (the word “dog”) and the thing signalled (the canine pet) have amalgamated into one mental representation of doggishness. Stroking a purring tabby and saying, “Pretty doggie,” is just unthinkable: “dog” goes with dogs, and that is that. In fact we find it difficult to think about dogs at all without the word “dog” being present simultaneously in our mind. The canine object and the verbal signal seem to be held together by a potent mental glue.

But this is not necessarily so. There are other areas of life, areas in less frequent use than words, where we have no difficulty in distinguishing the signal from the object or situation it represents. Beacons on hilltops were used as signals for centuries. Nowadays a red light at a junction signals a command to stop; a whistle signals the start of a race; a bell signals the start of school. Ships exchange messages using flags. In none of these cases do we have any problem in distinguishing the signal from the thing or event being signalled.

Speech signals, however, raise a special problem, for whenever we try to think about meanings, we use words. No matter how deeply we dig into our minds, we find words there. But is this because there is nothing but words there to find, or because using words is an essential part of the digging process? Is there a preverbal something there which acquires words as soon as we think about it? Or is there really nothing in our mind at all except verbal thoughts, thought-word complexes? For in the latter case, if thinking is essentially verbal, then there is no way that we can attempt, as we are doing in this book, to get behind the words to the meaning they signal and detach the one from the other for inspection. Nor can there be any explanation for our ability to say the same thing in different ways or to express the same meaning in different languages.

We are going to maintain that behind all our verbalising there lies a nonverbal substrate; the rest of this book will be spent in considering its nature and characteristics. But it may help us to envisage the situation more accurately if we first consider a few examples and illustrations.

1.3.2 Thought not always verbal

We are all quite familiar with nonverbal thinking in normal everyday circumstances. If we hum the first few lines of a tune and then forget the rest, we may spend some moments in intense concentration until the right tune surfaces in our minds. Cerebral activity is undoubtedly going on, but we are thinking music, not words. If we are comparing the colours of two garments to see if they match each other, once more we can spend some moments in concentration before reaching our conclusion, but we are not thinking words, we are thinking colours. Similarly, the kind of thinking that goes on as we pore over a geometry problem or an equation in algebra is intense, but it is not verbal: our thoughts are totally absorbed in spatial and numerical relations.

Of course, we have notations available to signal this kind of thinking. We can look up the score to remind ourselves of the forgotten melody. We can pass a half-finished mathematical problem to a friend for completion. In these ways even nonverbal thinking can be communicated. But in these areas we are in no danger of confusing the notation with the underlying thought, because few of us use musical or mathematical notations to the point of automaticity. The signal and the thing signalled have not become fused in our minds: we can readily distinguish what a tune sounds like from its written form in notes and staves.

Similarly, a nonverbal kind of thinking about everyday things underlies our very familiar notation of words and phrases. The thinking and the notation must be distinguished.

1.3.3 The preverbal substrate of verbal thoughts

Just as the thinking of a tune or the seeing of a mathematical relationship is prior to the communicating of them in the appropriate notation, so our thinking of ordinary daily things is different from and prior to the words we use when talking about them. If we are alone and wishing that the phone would ring, the inward desire is there whether or not it is verbalised. Indignation that our train is late or a sudden awareness that someone else is in the room are not necessarily accompanied by words at all. True, words follow very rapidly on the heels of such mental events, but they do not constitute the events themselves: they rise to the mind when we want to communicate, or even envisage communicating, such thoughts to others.

We have probably all had the experience of coming to a sudden halt in mid-sentence, unable to think of the word we want. At such times we know exactly what we mean, but the automatic correlation has broken down; we grope for words to express it. Proper names are particularly elusive, yet we can readily think of individual people known to us even when their names escape us. Something is happening at preverbal levels before the words come.

Sometimes nonverbal thinking takes the form of a flash of insight. We have been pondering a problem for some time without success, and suddenly, instantaneously, the answer unfolds itself in our mind, whole and complete. We try to grasp it on the wing, and find that the thought which took microseconds to think takes both time and effort to express in words. Thinking the thought and expressing it are two very different experiences.

Something similar is happening at preverbal levels when we hesitate between two ways of saying the same thing. This happens most frequently when composing a written communication: several ways of expressing the intended meaning are possible and a weighing-up process goes on until one is selected. The various verbal expressions are being compared with an underlying something, with what is meant. Then the one that matches best is chosen. Obviously the thoughts we are trying to express form a sort of internal standard against which their possible expressions are measured.

1.3.4 Multiple expressions of the same meaning

We said earlier that one meaning can be expressed by several different forms in the same language. We can say, “I was very scared” or “I was terribly frightened,” and we mean the same thing. The thoughts marching through our minds, thoughts of a past fear, are not tied indissolubly to particular words.

Similarly, one meaning can be expressed in different languages. I was once sitting with a number of other mothers, watching our respective toddlers playing with Lego bricks on the floor of a large student lounge. We were an international gathering: there was a Japanese mother present, I remember, as well as Koreans, Indians, and Americans. I was the sole British representative. Suddenly squabbles arose among the hitherto companionable youngsters, and two of them came to blows. Immediately each mother dived for her own offspring and removed him from the combat zone. I think I said to my own child something like, “O.K., O.K., that’s enough now.” Each mother round the circle was saying much the same, whether in Japanese, Korean, or Tamil. In four or five or more languages, the same thing was being said at the same time. Now this “same thing” is exactly what we have been talking about in the earlier part of this chapter: it is the underlying meaning, regardless of the particular language forms used to express it. Surely meaning is not tied as closely to words as we feel it to be when it can be expressed equally well in such diverse language codes as Korean and English.

Of course, there are not just five or six different language codes available for expressing meanings; there are upward of five thousand. Anything we can say in normal everyday speech can also be said in five thousand other ways and mean the same. Now, if every word in one language had an exact equivalent in the other languages, it might still be possible to say that the meaning expressed in all these different ways still related to words in a one-to-one way, each word in one language having a correlate that meant the same in the other languages. But this is not the case.

In fact, languages have very different ways of conveying the same meaning. When an Englishman wants to drink he says, “I’m thirsty”; the French say, “I have thirst”; the Kasena of Ghana say, “Water-drinking has me.” But the awareness of thirst is the same, whatever the language used to communicate it. The verbal forms used do not correlate directly with each other across language barriers, but each does correlate with a shared experience, a common meaning. In English I say, “It’s raining very heavily”; in Kasem I say, “The rain is great it exceeds.” There is no exact verbal correspondence: Kasem does not mention heaviness and English does not mention exceeding. Yet the meaning is the same.

There are five thousand different ways of saying it is raining, but there are not five thousand different meanings. There is just one meaning, identifiably the same regardless of what language is used to express it; it is not the exclusive property of any one language. But verbal forms, of course, do belong exclusively to one language. We cannot, therefore, hold that meanings are carried through the mind attached like limpets to the words that express them: they have a much more independent status than that. As I tell my friend that the rain is pouring down outside, my meaning is the same no matter what language I express it in.

It is not even possible to establish direct equivalences between languages on a clause-by-clause basis. I remember, in my early days in Ghana, asking a Kasena speaker how to say “Please fetch me water.” I thought I was asking for a one-clause utterance, well within my powers of mimicry and memory. I was wrong. The simple request apparently required a stream of sounds in Kasem, which, when transcribed and later broken down into separate words, turned out to mean, literally, “Go, you draw water, you take, you come, you give me.” Five Kasem clauses are needed to express what in English requires only one. Obviously the underlying meaning must have a structure of its own: it cannot be tied to the grammatical patterns of one language rather than another.

I have a friend who is completely bilingual in Gaelic and English. I understand no Gaelic, but I enjoy sitting and listening while she chats with her sister on the phone in an incredible mixture of the two languages. In the course of two minutes she will switch from Gaelic to English and back again, several times, often in mid-sentence. It is not that she thinks in Gaelic and translates parts into English, nor that she thinks in English and puts parts of it into Gaelic: she is not translating at all. She simply knows what she means, and says it in whatever language comes first to mind. But the underlying meaning, which can be expressed equally well in Gaelic or English, cannot be tied to the words of either. It exists in my friend’s mind independently of either language code.

1.4 So what is meaning?

In this book we will be studying the meaning-substrate that is the same regardless of what language it is expressed in, the single meaning factor underlying the various possible ways of “saying the same thing in different words.” This underlying meaning can be considered as a constant, and the various ways of expressing it as the variables. Our concern is with the constant, with meaning as a universal, signalled by—but totally different from—specific language forms.

There is nothing at all vague or insubstantial about meaning as here defined. We are so accustomed to thinking of meanings as being tied to words that thinking of meaning in any other way involves some unfamiliar mental gymnastics. We feel as if we were trying to grasp a will-o’-the-wisp, as if we were operating in a mental no man’s land. But that is not the case. Meaning is highly structured—it would need to be, since languages of such fascinating complexity express it. Nor is the study of meaning a subjective thing: it is firmly rooted in the language forms by which it is expressed. As meaning analysts we have to account for every element in those forms, and we may not import into the underlying meaning ideas of our own that are without formal evidence. It is a strictly linguistic matter.

Most of linguistics is normally taken up with the study of language signals as such. We are going to be concerned rather with what is signalled, not with the signals themselves. There are as many syntaxes and phonologies as there are languages, but there is only one underlying meaning signalled by all of them. This will be our study.

The remainder of this book will be devoted to mapping out, albeit incompletely, the structure of communicated meaning. As we trace, chapter by chapter, the varied elements comprising meaning structure, the reader will be provided not so much with information to be acquired as with a new outlook on language to be internalised and absorbed. Languages exist only in order to communicate meaning. It is therefore appropriate to study language with meaning not on its periphery but at its heart.

Suggestions for further study

1. Non-verbal thinking

For detailed arguments that thought is not always verbal, see Nuyts, 1990:270–78; 1992:229–34. For a briefer treatment of a similar position, see Brown & Yule, 1983:111; Blakemore, 1988:179; Goodman, 1984:20–21; Lakoff, 1987:289; Steiner, 1975:129.

2. The separability of the signal (word) from the thing signalled (meaning).

For a brief, clear introduction to this topic, see Crystal, 1987:100–1. For a practical approach with examples from various languages see Larson, 1984:3–14. This is the tip of a very large iceberg. Students who are interested in pursuing the theory of signs should read Ogden & Richards, 1923, especially p. 99; advanced students only are recommended to read Lyons, 1977:95–109; Peirce, 1940; Morris, 1971; Eco, 1976. For an exposition of Peirce, see Deacon, 1997:63, 70–73. For an account of how a man without language discovered what signs are, see Schaller, 1992.

3. Cross-language meaning

The study of “language-independent meaning” (Nuyts, 1992:230) has been much neglected, since meaning has widely been considered as a correlate of (language-specific) words: for this view see Catford, 1965:35; Lyons, 1977:238. This, in turn, has greatly hindered the development of a theory of translation: see Snell-Hornby, 1988:26. For efforts to redress the balance and take cross-language meaning seriously, see Nuyts, 1992:230; Snell-Hornby 1988:49; Callow, 1990: passim. All three propose a solution to the problem of translation from a cognitive standpoint. A sociosemiotic solution to the problem is presented in de Waard & Nida, 1986:60–77.

A written system of symbols representing meaning rather than sounds was developed by Bliss in an endeavour to promote cross-language communication. It is now widely used by people with communication handicaps. See Bliss, 1969; Crystal, 1987:280.

2

WHICH COME FIRST, WORDS OR MEANINGS?

2.1 One approach: words prior to meanings

2.1.1 One word, many meanings

2.1.2 The problem of specific utterances

2.1.3 Context as the key to interpretation

2.1.4 The decoding assumptions: their validity contested

2.1.4.1 Is interpretation a two-stage process?

2.1.4.2 Is there a mental lexicon?

2.2 An alternative approach: meanings prior to words

In the light of the previous chapter, we are left with a problem. If words do not express meanings in a one-to-one way, then how do they express them? People undoubtedly use words to express what they mean, but what is the relationship between these words and their meanings? If quite different words in another language express the same meaning equally well, then the relationship between the meaning and these various expressions cannot be an extrapolation from the patterns and rules of any one language—it must be altogether more universal in its nature than that.

Moreover, words and meanings are very different in kind. Words are objective and classifiable; they can be captured in print, or recorded; they belong to the external world in which a community shares a way of talking. But meanings are internal; they are inside the heads of communicators. How can we relate something so objective as words with something so elusive and intangible as the meanings in someone’s head? And words, as we have seen, can sustain multiple meanings, yet we feel, as we use them, that we are communicating just one meaning. How are we to negotiate the gulf between the numerous possible meanings of a word, and the singular meaning intended by a speaker?

These problems are all related. There are two possible ways of approaching them. One may give priority to words, and on that basis attempt to explain meaning; conversely, one may give priority to meaning, and on that basis attempt to explain words.

2.1 One approach: words prior to meanings

The approach which gives priority to words tries to determine, first, how words (usually in isolation) relate to meaning and, second, how hearers decode those words when in use, in order to arrive at the one intended meaning of the speaker.

2.1.1 One word, many meanings

The naive view that words match meanings one to one has proved untenable, simply an illusion of the man in the street. Linguists instead hold a one-to-many view: one word has, or at least may have, many meanings.

The one-to-many view is certainly in accord with the facts and may be readily illustrated. Take, for example, the English word “band.” When I was small this word called to mind a group of people playing music in the park; nowadays it calls to mind a pop group. But it is also used to refer to other groups of people such as robbers, guerrillas, or outlaws like Robin Hood. In addition, it can be used to mean something of a long, narrow shape: we talk about a band of colour, or a hairband, or wavebands on the radio, or a band of trees, or a band of high pressure. The objects described are widely diverse, the shared meaning being that of length and narrowness. The word is also used to refer to narrow objects that are circular, such as rubber bands, or the identification rings put on birds, or wedding rings.

Obviously one word can indeed correlate with many meanings. Nor is “band” a strained or far-fetched illustration. “Grate” can be part of a fireplace or an action performed on cheese and vegetables to reduce them to small fragments. “Fine” can refer to the weather, to health, to a thin line, or to a penalty exacted in the form of money. One-word—many-meanings is obviously a fact of how languages operate. Rather than say that a word has a meaning, we should say that one word has numerous potential meanings.

2.1.2 The problem of specific utterances

If a word has several possible meanings, then how does the person addressed know which meaning the speaker intends when he uses it? This is strictly a decoding problem (the speaker himself knows what he means), but it is a real one and has exercised linguists considerably. Even putting the word in the context of a sentence does not necessarily solve the problem. “They’ve gone flat” is equally applicable to bicycle tyres or to a choir.

The problem arises even with words that apparently have only one meaning, words such as “pencil,” “cucumber,” “money,” and so on. For words are such general things: “pencil” can refer to writing implements of a variety of sizes, shapes, and colours, and there are millions of them in the world. Yet when I say “I’ve dropped my pencil,” I am referring to one specific one only. How does the listener travel, mentally, from the general word to the specific reference?

This problem has become increasingly important in recent years. Formerly, linguists were content to study languages as systems; indeed, it was widely considered that this was their only proper sphere. A linguist would classify words, study their phonology or morphology, group them and consider their syntax, but all this was done with the aim of clarifying the structures and systems of the language at a high level of abstraction. A sentence such as “Will she buy it this weekend?” was relevant as an example of a question or transitive clause, and so on, but no more. The same sentence could be uttered about hundreds of purchases, on hundreds of occasions: these specific utterances did not fall within the province of the linguist. Hence any possible ambiguity to a hypothetical decoder was of no great interest.

Those days are gone. Linguists are now very interested in analysing specific utterances, communicated on specific occasions. And as soon as linguists, who have at their disposal words and grammars at a highly abstract level, are faced with specific utterances to analyse, the multiple meanings of words and the ambiguity of sentences become major issues. How does the linguist bridge the gap from the abstract to the specific? How does the listener know which, of the many possible meanings, is the single intended reference?

2.1.3 Context as the key to interpretation

Proposed solutions to the problem of interpretation are usually along the following lines. Words in isolation may have many meanings, but words used in a specific context have only one, the one the speaker intended. The difference obviously lies in the context. If, therefore, we start from the general, ambiguous forms supplied by the grammar and lexicon of the language and derive general meanings from them, these general meanings can be made more specific by adding the context of the utterance—who was saying it, to whom, and why, plus any other contextual material that appears relevant. Once the context is known to be that of a choir practice, the previously ambiguous expression “gone flat” is immediately understood to refer to the singing.

The decoding of utterances is thus seen to be a two-stage thing. Our mental lexicon and grammar provide the general meaning, or several possible meanings; the added context brings us to the speaker’s intended meaning. The two stages need not be conscious, though they can be so when we do not know the context and have to search for an appropriate one—if for example we are translating an ancient document, or enter a room in the middle of a conversation. But whether conscious or not, the two elements of grammar-lexicon and context are both considered to be present, and present in that order. And thus the problem of getting from general meanings to specific ones is solved.

2.1.4 The decoding assumptions: their validity contested

But does such a cumbersome process give a true picture of the situation? It is certainly the only possible solution if the assumptions made are correct, but the assumptions lying behind this approach are by no means incontrovertible.

2.1.4.1 Is interpretation a two-stage process?

The assumption that we interpret utterances in two stages, general meanings providing a basis to which contexts are added, seems counter to our everyday experience of communication. Two-stage interpretation does of course take place on occasion. We join a group who are already chatting and feel frustrated because we register what the words mean in a general way, but do not know who or what our friends are talking about. Then suddenly some remark or comment clues us in as to the context, and it all falls into place. With the provision of the context, the reference becomes clear. In such circumstances, the two-stage assumption seems perfectly valid.

What is not at all obvious is why two separate stages should be assumed in normal communication. Joining a conversation in the middle is not the norm; it is a truncated version of ordinary conversational situations. The translation of an ancient document is likewise a far-from-normal situation inasmuch as neither the language nor the culture is known at first hand to the translator. But why should it be thought that the decoding process in normal situations should be the same as that in the nonnormative, truncated ones?

Certainly in daily life we are not conscious of the many possible meanings of words, we are not conscious of ambiguities, and we are not in any sense aware of processing these in two stages to arrive at the intended reference. Let us consider again the multiple meanings of the word “band.” If a radio announcer says one morning, “Successive bands of rain are crossing the country from west to east,” he means only that the area of land on which the rain falls is, at any given time, long and narrow. No flicker of a reference to orchestras or guerrillas or rubber bands crosses his mind. He has simply selected the most appropriate word to get across the meaning he wants to convey; that the word can have other meanings in other contexts is totally irrelevant to him. He is not thinking of words, he is thinking of meanings.

And this is equally true of his hearers: they seem to home in without hesitation on the one meaning of “band” that he is using. Similarly, in the same utterance, they have no difficulty with the word “country” either. “Country” can mean either the whole of a land or nation, or those parts of it which are sparsely populated and used mainly for agriculture. But no English speaker would think that the latter meaning was intended here, and that the rain was by-passing urban areas. The very suggestion sounds ludicrous.

Indeed, to the ordinary man in the street, ambiguities do seem a bit odd, often a source of amusement. It sometimes takes considerable mental effort to realise that another meaning of an utterance is even possible. Some people consider puns clever or amusing, while others greet them with a groan; virtually no one reacts to them as normal communication. Multiple meanings do not seem to be part of our normal thinking process; the mind has to twist itself round, as it were, to realise that they are there.

The suggestion, then, that our normal decoding process starts from a generalised verbal base with multiple meanings, seems prima facie very unlikely. Why, in that case, is it so widely assumed?

There seems only one possible reason for such a counterintuitive assumption, and that is that it is rendered necessary by other even more fundamental assumptions. The first of these is that we have in our minds a sort of lexicon, in which words in their various senses are defined, accompanied by a grammar showing their potential patternings. The second is that apart from this lexicon and grammar, the mind as it waits to receive a message is, in effect, a blank. It follows that interpretation has to start with general meanings because our mental furniture allows us no alternative.

2.1.4.2 Is there a mental lexicon?

Let us now look at the first of these assumptions, that we have in our minds a lexicon containing the available words of our language, defined according to their various potential meanings. (The second assumption, that the mind contains a sort of blank television screen for the recording of messages, is one we shall be contesting in chapter 4.) Obviously our minds have some means of storing and retrieving words: to refer to the storage area metaphorically as a lexicon seems reasonable. The speaker is assumed to go to this lexicon to find stored words to convey his meaning; the hearer goes to a similar lexicon in his own mind in order to decode them. But we must not press the metaphor too far; there are some features of real-world lexicons that may not be true of minds. For instance, to be like a lexicon, each word-entry in our mind would need to be located in one place for accessibility, the different senses being distinguished under the one head word. Also, the meaning provided for each sense would have to be the one which was applicable every time the word was used. Moreover, the meanings of different words similar in meaning would have to be clearly distinguished to avoid confusion. These are features of every lexicon on our bookshelves. But do they represent the way words are organised in our minds?

Let us consider whether only one mental corner is, in fact, allocated to each word which we store. There seems no prima facie evidence for this. We do not normally associate the file in the toolbox with the file in the office; it takes a definite effort to bring the two together. It is as though each had a separate mental corner of its own. Nor is it certain that even words with only one sense, such as “cauliflower” or “chrysanthemum,” are stored in only one place. Research into the different areas of the brain indicates that there are separate storage areas for identifying words when hearing them, and for locating them when wanting to speak them, and also for words in their written version. Of course these various storage areas must also be linked with each other; otherwise we would be unaware that they all represented the same verbal signal. But even if we assume that there is some central point on which all these versions of the signal converge, we must be careful not to think of that point as in any way an isolated, one-word mental entry. We shall be arguing in chapter 6 that our mind is a living, complex network, for which any filing-system metaphor is inadequate.

And what about the stipulation that the meaning provided for each word would have to be applicable on every possible occasion? (This is an essential proviso since on the lexicon theory each word only appears once). If the mind were like a lexicon in this respect, all specific details, true on some occasions but not on others, would need to be stripped away. Only the irreducible minimum of meaning of the word in question would remain. My Oxford dictionary defines “boy” as a male child or youth—which is surely true on all occasions when the word is used. But what has become of the noise, the energy, the cheerful grubbiness and the casual attitude to homework which the word calls to mind? The reply may come, not unreasonably, that these factors which allow of exceptions (there do exist, presumably, clean boys who like homework) are simply stored elsewhere. But in that case do we really need the lexicon? If in order to provide definitions we have to remove all contextual details and in order to explain communication we have to bring the details back again, why remove them in the first place?

Virtually the same arguments apply to the third feature of lexicons—that definitions should clearly distinguish the meanings of different words so that there is no overlap in cases of possible confusion. This results in definitions such as the following for “butterfly”: “Diurnal lepidopterous insect (cf. MOTH) with knobbed antennae, carrying the wings erect when at rest” (Oxford Illustrated Dictionary, 1962: Oxford University Press). This definition clearly and overtly draws attention to the factors that differentiate butterflies from moths. It provides necessary and sufficient conditions of butterfly-ness: if an insect is diurnal with knobbed antennae, etc., then it is assuredly a butterfly, and if not, not. But none of this comes to mind when I am looking at a cloud of beautiful, fragile creatures fluttering around our buddleia bush. The word “butterfly” correlates with much more than a definition. Lexicons are purpose-built for identification, but when we are communicating we want to do much more than identify.

I seriously doubt whether there are lexicons of this kind in our minds at all. Certainly if I ask my students to produce a definition of the meaning of a word, even a straightforward word such as “chair” or “table,” they have to think hard to produce one; it is not ready to hand. If my son is reading and asks me to explain a word that is new to him, I almost always know what the word means, but no dictionary-like definition leaps to mind. There seems to me no positive evidence whatsoever that words as they exist in our minds are contextless logical isolates with definitions attached.

A further assumption seems to be involved here, that the analysis of language in daily use must be based on the prior analysis of language as a system. But surely this is the wrong way round. It is only by examining a vast number of actual utterances that linguists or dictionary makers are able to arrive at abstract syntactic patternings or logically necessary definitions. They then apparently assume that any given definition enshrines the essential nature of the word and that this must be what operates in communication—the specific details provided by daily experience are considered as optional extras.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Words primarily express meanings. Only secondarily do they realise syntactic and lexical systems. If we want to understand how words operate in communication, we must start afresh with the abundant detail of specific utterances. We must be concerned with how words are used to convey meanings, not with how they may be defined to realise systems.

2.2 An alternative approach: meanings prior to words

The approach just rejected in section 2.1 assumes that words come first and meanings are in some way attached to them. Throughout this book the opposite view is maintained—that meanings come first and words in some way express them. People who are communicating know what they mean, and they select the best words to express that meaning. It is not really words that mean things; it is people who mean things when they use words. Words do not have meanings, they signal them.

In the rest of Part 1 we will be presenting our assumptions in detail: that the minds of communicators are not blank, but full of content long before words reach them via the airwaves or the page; that words are not in our minds as logical abstractions, but in ways much more closely related to their use; and that the speaker is central.

It will become apparent that we are asking and answering quite different kinds of questions from those that arise from a word-centred view. To illustrate, let us go back to our earlier example, “They’ve gone flat.” Let us now suppose that these words were uttered by a young cyclist to his companion as they were standing at the side of the road with their bicycles. To those who take a word-centred view of meaning, it is of great interest that these words could also be uttered in a concert hall about a choir. To those who take a speaker-centred view of meaning, it is of great interest that the same meaning could have been expressed by saying, “Bother! Punctures! Both tyres!” The close relationship between these two utterances requires explanation, and that explanation is not to be found in the words used, which are very different, but in the meanings expressed, which are very close.

Owing to the prevalence of the word-centred view, inadequate attention has been paid to the phenomenon that the same meaning can be expressed in numerous different ways. Even less attention has been given to the fact that the same meaning can be expressed in different languages. If meaning is considered to be inherent in words, it is impossible to explain either of these familiar facts. But as soon as we locate meaning in heads rather than in words, explanations of these phenomena come within our grasp.

We will find that this approach has pay-off in other areas also. One is the area of reference. If, in analysing specific utterances, one takes generalised, abstract words and sentences as one’s starting point, then the specific reference of the lexical items used is discovered only at the end of a complex process. If one starts with someone meaning something, then reference is right at the heart of communication: referring is something done by a speaker and not by words. Another vital area is that of the speaker’s purpose in communicating. If one starts with a generalised clause, then the purposes of the speaker have to be in some way overlaid on it so as to explain, for instance, the difference between a statement and a command. But if the speaker is central in the theory, then it is found that his purposes control every aspect of a discourse from beginning to end; they are not added piecemeal to pre-existing skeletal clause structures.

We said at the beginning of this chapter that we need a theory of the relationship between meanings and their verbal expressions sufficiently universal to account for the expression of the same meaning in different languages. We need, then, a mental correlate of words which is not language specific. We also need to bridge the gap between words, which are community property, and meanings, which belong strictly to individual communicators. To do so we need a mental correlate of words that is deeply rooted in the cultures and contexts of communicators themselves. Our fundamental assumption is that meaning is not to be sought in word categories, nor is it related to a word count. Meaning is there, waiting as it were to be discovered, in the thoughts and intentions of speakers.

When listening to or reading a communication, therefore, we do not ask, “What do these words mean?” We ask, “What does the message sender mean in using these words?” Words are only the signals; meanings are in people’s heads.

Suggestions for further study

1. The decoding approach and the mental lexicon (sections 2.1.2, 2.1.3)

On the process of decoding specific utterances, see Johnson-Laird, 1983:244–49; Sperber & Wilson, 1986, passim. On the existence and function of a mental lexicon, see Aitchison, 1994 passim, but especially 3–15, 222–31; Johnson-Laird, 1983:229; Levelt, 1989. For a radically different approach to the lexicon, see Nuyts, 1992:257–61; Wierzbicka, 1985:39–40, and passim.

2. Context and Meaning (section 2.1.3)

On the place of context in the decoding approach, see Johnson-Laird, 1983:230–33; Sperber & Wilson, 1986:132–42.

For a view that sees context as central to meaning, see Firth, 1957:191–92, 225–27. See also Lyons, 1981:195–219 (for beginning linguists) and Lyons, 1977:607–13 (more advanced). Firth’s view of meaning as function in the wider social context has been developed especially by M. A. K. Halliday and the systemic school. See, for example, Halliday, 1978:109–11; Halliday & Hasan, 1985:46–48; Sampson, 1980:223–27.

3. The basis of language in the brain (section 2.1.4.2)

For very readable accounts of current brain research as it relates to language, see Blakemore, 1988:185–89; Sacks, 1986:76–80.

Serious students could start by consulting the Oxford Companion to the Mind, edited by Richard L. Gregory (1987, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press). See especially the articles titled Broca; Language: Neuropsychology; Language Areas in the Brain; Wernicke. For a brief word of warning from a neuroscientist on the interpretation of data derived from brain damage, see Rose, 1992:121.

4. The centrality of meaning (section 2.2)

To claim that meanings are (ontologically) prior to words is to say that we need a linguistics of language use rather than of language systems. Cf. Snell-Hornby (1988:49): “ . . . demands are being made again for what twenty years ago would have been an intrinsic contradiction, for a ‘linguistique de la parole . . . .’” For similar views, see Bruner, 1986:82–87; Robinson, 1990:8; Steiner, 1975:122, 204.

5. For discussion

1. “. . . modern analytic linguists are no great friends to language.” (Steiner, 1975:122).

2. “. . . meanings are precisely in the head—there is nowhere else for them to be . . . ” (Searle, 1983:200).

3

THE MAN BEHIND THE MESSAGE

3.1 Why do we communicate?

3.1.1 The purpose of exchanging information

3.1.2 The purpose of effecting change

3.1.3 The purpose of sharing attitudes

3.2 What mental characteristics structure our communications?

3.2.1 The unity factor: mental content is organised in nesting units

3.2.2 The coherence factor: mental content interrelates consistently

3.2.3 The prominence factor: mental content varies in importance

3.2.4 The availability factor: mental content varies in accessibility

3.2.4.1 Foreground and background

3.2.4.2 Factors affecting accessibility: relevance, emotion, familiarity

3.2.4.3 The background of familiarity

As human beings, we communicate with each other during most of our waking lives. We greet each other when we first awake and say goodnight before we go to sleep. We comment on the weather, answer the telephone, invite people to lunch, exchange news and views. We issue instructions, listen to talks on the radio, express sympathy with a friend or indignation to anyone who will listen. And as if this were not enough, we fill in any silent gaps in our day with written communications, with newspapers, recipes, letters, advertisements, and magazines about everything from computers to conservation.

To devise any theoretical model in terms of which to understand and analyse such a variety of messages is certainly daunting. Let us start with the human beings who are capable of such a variety of expression and ask two questions. First, why do we communicate? Second, What inner faculties and abilities enable us to send and receive messages? The answers to these questions will provide the groundwork for a model of communication based on the purposes and mental make-up of man as a message sender. Only when this is accomplished will we be in a position to study the messages themselves with some hope of success.

3.1 Why do we communicate?

In one sense we communicate because we can do no other. We are social beings, and communicating with other people constitutes an essential part of our human nature. But when it comes to analysing messages, this does not help us a great deal. If all messages are simply the expression of our need to communicate, then this hardly provides a criterion for evaluating any particular message. Rather we need to ask the question afresh for each message in turn: why was this message sent? This should enable us to sort our messages, whether long or short, into rough categories, providing a basis for further analysis. We postulate three such categories of communicative purpose, to be discussed in the following sections. The order in which they are presented does not indicate any inherent priority of one over the others.

3.1.1 The purpose of exchanging information

We live in a world that impinges on us constantly—not only a world of other people, but a world full of things and institutions that are vital to our existence and well-being: food and drink, home and work, money to be earned and spent, leisure to be enjoyed. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of our communication concerns the world in which we all live. Because each one of us is ignorant of many things, we are constantly exchanging information with each other, constantly building up an ever more accurate picture of the world around us. This is the dimension of news flashes, of scientific reports, of births and deaths columns, of the Guinness Book of Records. It is the dimension of facts.

On the whole, we move comfortably in a world of facts. Children at school may feel that there are altogether too many of them, and the information explosion may make those of us who are older feel much the same at times. But facts have one great, compensating characteristic: they can be checked on. Either they are true, or they are not. We compare the report with the available evidence and we reach a verdict, true or false.

In addition to being verifiable, facts are also, at least potentially, interesting. Of course, all of us are interested in some areas of life more than others; few of us find everything interesting. And if a fact does not interest us we forget it very rapidly. But given a topic in which we are interested, we welcome new facts, or seek them out, with eagerness. Thus our fact-exchanging communications do not arise simply from necessity, but from our eagerness to discover.

Fact-exchanging messages, from “John hit Bill” on up, have been studied by linguists much more than messages of any other kind. They are, of course, simpler in many respects, and more amenable to certain specific approaches such as logical analysis. Probably the major reason for their long dominance of the linguistic scene has been the preoccupation of linguists, until very recently, with written material. The presentation of facts is common in written material; spoken messages are much more varied.

One result of this emphasis on information exchange has been that, until recently, the learning of a foreign language has concentrated heavily on giving and receiving information. When I was in Brazil, struggling with the basic essentials of Portuguese, I found that my traditionally oriented studies had prepared me to compose messages to give to others and to ask questions to elicit the information I needed. But I was totally unequipped to fill in a conversation with all those encouraging little remarks and comments a hearer is supposed to use to reassure a speaker that his message is getting across. And later, in Africa, when I considered myself reasonably competent in the local language, I suddenly found that I was totally incapable of being angry in it. Emotion is not clothed in quite the same garments as facts.

I thus became alerted, through the pressure of personal incompetence, to other areas of language in which forms of expression differ from those employed in purely informational contexts. It is a little difficult to designate those other areas with scientific accuracy, not from lack of evidence but perhaps from a surplus of it; for people use language for a great variety of purposes, and not only for one purpose at a time. A fact can be asserted simply to annoy. A question can be asked in order to expose ignorance rather than to get an answer. But if we try, for simplicity’s sake, to establish a minimum number of very broad categories, we end up with two other main purposes which shape our communications and are totally different in nature from the purpose of factual exchange. They are: to bring about change and to share attitudes.

3.1.2 The purpose of effecting change

Sometimes our communication is concerned not with what the world is but with what it might be. Such communication does not assert anything about the world, but rather attempts to change it. Thus we may ask for a cup of tea, or offer to act as baby-sitter, or urge someone to vote for a particular candidate. Written materials summon us to interviews, request our support for community projects, and instruct us how to bring up our children or make apple pie or repair a faulty light switch. The one thing that all these messages have in common is the aim of bringing about some change in the present situation, of causing some things to happen and other things not to happen. At the grammar-book level, this is the chapter on the imperative. And since, in real life, most of us are rarely in a position to command outright, communication intended to bring about change may consist of anything from veiled hints to suggestions, requests, and entreaties.

3.1.3 The purpose of sharing attitudes

The third main purpose of human communication, is, to put it broadly, that of keeping in touch with our fellow human beings. We need to establish and maintain good relations with each other. It is important to us to express our feelings and reactions to others, and to receive similar input from them in return. Of all the purposes for which mankind communicates, this is the most inward. We are not concerned with the outside world directly, either to know it or to manipulate it. Rather, we are making comments on it, expressing our reaction to it, using it simply as a jumping-off point for sharing our feelings, reactions, and evaluations with others. And because relating to others is so important to us, and because being silent about our feelings and opinions is so unnatural to us, communications with this very social purpose occur with great frequency in our normal speech. From the unpremeditated “Ouch!” to the ponderous “It is my considered opinion,” our speech is studded with expressions of ourselves in which we put our inner being on display.

For many reasons, utterances that share feelings have been largely neglected by linguists. Some of these utterances, of course, scarcely fit into traditional patterns of analysis. One cannot conjugate “Ouch!” But others, I think, were neglected because they appeared, at face value, to be exchanges of fact. Both facts and feelings can be expressed in the indicative. Nevertheless there is a difference, in spite of grammatical identity, between “She is an elderly lady” and “She is an old busybody!” or between “I think he is a chartered accountant” and “I think he is a blundering idiot!” (Note the very different meanings of “I think” in the last two examples, the first indicating uncertainty concerning a fact, the second being an expression of personal reaction.) In spite of their grammatical similarities, these contrasting expressions exhibit a difference of thrust and attitude for which any serious study of meaning must account.

3.2 What mental characteristics structure our communications?

We must now consider in greater detail the mental make-up of the human message sender, for his communications are inevitably grounded in the parameters and capacities of his mind. Who is this person who by airwaves, light waves, or any other conceivable means communicates his thoughts, feelings, and desires to other beings around him?

To begin at the beginning, we all started as babies. Long before we could talk we were experiencing constant impressions from the world around us through our senses, and this sensory impact has continued throughout our lives. All these experiences from babyhood up have left some imprint in the storehouses we call our minds. Each experience and each activity has left its record, a wealth of historical data that staggers the imagination.

The first thing to notice about all this is its immediacy and personalness. These are not just memories—they are my memories, this happened to me. I can rerun my past in my mind (who knows how?—it need not be visually) and am almost in the midst of it again. I can convey my thoughts and memories to you in speech, but they are my memories, and I can never make them yours.

These experiences and impressions are far from being a higgledy-piggledy mess in our minds. That would be unbearable, and a desert island would be a welcome escape from the torture of yet more assaulting experiences. The reverse is the case, of course: we revel in new experiences, and in relating new to old (“Do you know, this just reminds me of . . .”). The lives into which few new experiences come are emotionally as well as factually deprived.

The reason I can operate with mental calmness in the midst of my welter of memories and associations is that my mind-contents are all organised and arranged around me, accessible when I require them but not obtruding themselves when I do not. And if we are to have any understanding of how people communicate, we must understand the disposition of what we clumsily call their mental furniture—because it is what people are inwardly that they express outwardly; the way we organise our utterances reflects the shapes and contours of our minds.

Let us turn, then, to the study of these mental configurations, these cognitive characteristics which at the profoundest levels give structure to all our mental processes. Much of the realm of the mind is still hidden from us, so this survey cannot be complete. But certain characteristics emerge very clearly in all kinds of communication, and these deserve our careful consideration.

3.2.1 The unity factor: mental content is organised in nesting units

Man has a capacity for generalisation and identification. He can identify a new experience as in some way “the same thing” that he has experienced before, and he stores both experiences in the same place. Anyone who has had much to do with small children will remember the delight and triumph with which they associate a picture of a rose with the real flower, or the washing on the line with the family member it belongs to, or the familiar chair with the person who regularly sits there. Until we get inured to it by long custom, the exercise of our inherent mental faculties of identifying and sorting and relating is a joyful and satisfying experience.

We continue, throughout our lives, to compare and categorise, even when these activities have become so habitual that they have retreated far below the level of consciousness. All new experiences and perceptions go through the same process, and so our present experiences are constantly being related to our past and adding increasing richness and detail to our inward stores.

In this way man builds up a picture of the world around him, and of himself as related to that world. His “picture” (a multidimensional one) consists of blocks or areas or fields of related material, each made up of smaller areas, all peopled with recollections garnered from experience—not haphazard recollections, but processed so that like is found with like, and what was associated in life is associated when stored. Thus a young child has a family area in his mind, with separate sub-areas for father, mother, and family members, and for all sorts of home-based events and happenings such as playing, eating, and helping mother. As he grows up he adds an outside-the-home area, and this later multiplies into school areas and hobby areas and so on.

These areas have been called “frames” or “files” in technical literature. The important thing to remember is that they are there, and that they are like boxes within boxes or rooms in a building. All our analogies, though, fail at the edges; their boundaries are too solid. But they do serve to illustrate one crucial point: however fuzzy their borders, our mental storage areas are arranged in a roughly hierarchical way; they nest into each other.

The reason for this is man’s mental ability to hold a lot of detail in his mind under one large umbrella, as some sort of unity, and at the same time to zoom in on details if he wishes. He can look back over what I did last summer as a whole and pick out my weekend in Paris as in itself a unit within that summer’s experience. And within that he can focus on where I stayed, what I did, what I ate, people I met, and so on. He can then zoom back up to what I did last summer, and see that in turn as a participating unit in a larger whole such as how I’ve spent the time since graduating.

In other words, man’s past experience is stored in his mind in areas, and it is stored in the form of units within units. He has the capacity to see very complex events as in some way a unity. At the same time he has the capacity to see the constituent parts as themselves unities. Without this capacity, memory as we know it could not exist and coherent thoughts could not take place. It is not simply that our minds would be confused and disorganised, it is rather that thinking as we know it could not occur at all. One of the essential human capacities that makes thought possible is the recognition of unity relating variety together, and variety conjoining to form a unity.

3.2.2 The coherence factor: mental content interrelates consistently

As rational beings we have the fundamental capacity to relate things to each other coherently; indeed, we have an incapacity not to. We are under a strong inner compulsion to hold our world in our minds in a way that makes sense, where different factors match each other and intermesh without contradiction.

This ability to relate things consistently underlies the capacity for grouping similar materials in units (sec. 3.2.1). Things belong in one unit because they are related to each other; they are not simply a conglomerate of isolated entities. And all these related elements build up into complex networks, which themselves are closely interconnected in coherent ways. Our mental structures resemble spiders’ webs much more than boxes.

Our strong sense of coherence also enables us to move with mental surefootedness from one area to another. Our trip to Paris may lead us to plane flights and restaurants if pursued in one direction, or to a former French teacher and examinations if pursued in another, but always our mind is following a consistent pathway among elements that stand in coherent relations with each other. If, in the midst of conversation, we challenge someone saying, “What on earth made you think of that?,” they can usually tell us: the coherent thread may have been highly personal and individual, but it was there.

It is our deep instinct for relating things coherently that enables us to integrate our moment by moment experiences into our storage networks. No matter what we are currently experiencing or thinking about, our mind quietly moves up to the front those networks which are related and relevant, and has them ready at hand to play their part in interpreting, assessing, and filing the present. We cannot find a place in our minds for anything unless it relates in some way to what is already there. Thus all new material is related to existing networks and is appropriately stored away ready for later access.

But much of our stored knowledge comes not from our own personal experience, but from a variety of external sources such as conversations, lectures, books, and the media. Interestingly, we do not file this material in any separate “second-hand” storage area in our minds but integrate it fully into our existing networks. My knowledge of the Pacific, which I have never seen, is much the same in accuracy and extent as my knowledge of the Atlantic, across which I have both sailed and flown. It seems that the greater immediacy of personal experience, crucial though it is in other respects, is much less important in the filing process than the instinct for relating coherently and for building up a world picture that is completely in balance.

But what happens when we come across some fact or element in experience that seems not to be coherent with our existing world view? One option, of course, is simply to forget it, whether from lack of interest or in self-defence. But much more commonly, a kind of inner tension is set up: we are frustrated because we cannot file it consistently, and we keep on the lookout for explanations. This inner mental tension is very important. It is the source of many of our questions and enquiries. It also colours our whole mental outlook: a mind in tension approaches new communication waving, as it were, a very different set of antennae from those of a mind in neutral. We expect coherence enough to search for it actively.

3.2.3 The prominence factor: mental content varies in importance

Once more we are dealing with a characteristic of our thought processes which is all but inescapable. Discounting special cases like the multiplication table and airline timetables, we seem incapable of thinking without assigning more importance and significance to some elements than to others. If asked to describe a picture, we might say, “Well, there’s a cart with two people in it, in the shallows of a stream, and a dog watching from the bank.” These objects may take up only a fraction of the total area of the picture; nevertheless, by selecting what is prominent we give our questioner a much better idea of the picture than by mentioning every tree, field, and cloud in the landscape. It is true that each one of these details makes its own contribution to the overall effect, but their function is as foils, as support to the central, prominent features.

The same applies in all aspects of life: the theme in a piece of music, the vein in a leaf, the vows in a wedding service, the hero in a story. The less prominent factors are oriented towards the central one, which stamps its character on the whole.

The ability to assign relative prominence pervades our thinking. Our brains receive a mass of sensory data, but by the time it comes to consciousness it is already sorted out into prominent and less prominent elements. This has a major part to play in the function of memory, the processing of information, and the way we communicate with our fellows. Both as receivers and as transmitters of messages, we are fine-tuned to comparative importance and significance.

This factor of prominence relates very closely to the previously mentioned factors of unity and coherence. In section 3.2.1, for example, we quoted the family and a weekend in Paris as instances of units containing internal diversity. That these function in our thinking as unitary wholes seems unchallengeable, yet their boundaries are somewhat indeterminate. Just when did the weekend in Paris begin? Is my prospective son-in-law a family member, or not? For a family photograph he functions as a family member before the actual wedding ceremony; for legal purposes he does not. The fact that the weekend and the family are recognised as units in spite of their fuzzy borders is due to the prominence of their central elements. The Paris weekend is characterised by sightseeing, French food, and torrents of French speech; the family is characterised by its central members in their home setting. These are what give each unit its identity: the prominent central elements, not the boundaries, provide the determining factor.

Similarly, prominence has a part to play in coherence. Prominent elements in any unit are involved in a dense network of relationships, whereas peripheral elements exhibit much weaker linkages.

The three factors of unity, coherence, and prominence operate together in characterising any unit in human experience, whether in the arts, in nature, in society, or in communication. Each identifiable whole is uniquely defined by its place in a nesting group of units, its internal and external relations, and its prominent elements in relation to the rest.

3.2.4 The availability factor: mental content varies in accessibility

There is a fourth, somewhat different, factor which also structures our communications, namely, the accessibility of the content involved. Like the other three, this factor is a constant parameter of our thinking, but unlike them it neither defines nor contributes to the units themselves. Rather, once units are established, the factor of accessibility controls the ease with which they can be brought into play, in thought or in communication.

3.2.4.1 Foreground and background

It is quite impossible for us to attend to all our mental content simultaneously; our minds have a single stream of consciousness, and we select a very limited amount of material to form the content of our thinking at any given time. The rest of our stored mental network remains quiescent, held in reserve. We employ a very useful metaphor to distinguish between mental content which is or is not under attention at any given time. We say, “That is not in the forefront of my mind at the moment,” or “I have it in the back of my mind,” or “We’d better leave it on the back burner.” The metaphor of frontness and backness is useful; it provides us with a way of talking about our own thought processes. It therefore seems appropriate to use the term “foreground” for whatever is present to the stream of consciousness. The rest of the network is, correspondingly, the background.

That is, however, too simplistic a picture: there are degrees of background. Although some thoughts are consciously foregrounded, we are aware of other half-thoughts, or even more shadowy entities, which lurk not far behind, hovering in the wings and ready at any moment to come on stage. I may be concentrating on cooking the dinner, but very close to the surface is the awareness of a sick child in the next room, a letter recently arrived, or a double-booked evening to be sorted out. By contrast, other areas of my experience will be buried deep, being totally irrelevant to the cooking of dinners and the affairs of the day. I once spent a year in Brazil, and there is certainly a Brazil network somewhere in the recesses of my mind. But in the recesses it stays while I cook the dinner, there being nothing in the preparation of Yorkshire pudding and carrots to call it into the foreground.

3.2.4.2 Factors affecting accessibility: relevance, emotion, familiarity

It is of great importance to students of communication to know something of the nature of backgrounded networks and to be able to assess what factors correlate with the deep recesses, and what with accessibility. For instance, some things are in the background because they were never very much in the foreground. A telephone number I used only once or twice, a friend of a friend whom I met only briefly, a book I dipped into in my youth but discarded—even these must have left their imprint in some way, but they are beyond conscious recall: they are no longer accessible.

Other things are in the background because they have only tenuous relationships with the rest of my experience and are therefore rarely reactivated. In some remote corner of my mind is the fact that the second son of William the Conqueror is buried in Winchester Cathedral. But this is a bit of information that relates only scantily to anything else that interests me, so I rarely have occasion to recall it. Its relational network is therefore both flimsy and little used. Access to such information can be gained by one of two methods. A highly specific stimulus (“What can you tell me about the family of William the Conqueror?”) will bring it to the surface. Alternatively, such information can be upgraded by enriching its network—by making a special study of Norman England, for example, or by visiting Winchester Cathedral and drawing a plan of its layout. But unless special effort is made, information with a minimal network remains in the background of my mind.

Another factor affecting accessibility is emotion. We must not think that our minds register only facts. Anything affecting our emotions will be remembered long after very similar events have been forgotten. Emotion seems to open up a very wide track for the process of recall. Similarly, we file in accessible places anything that is relevant to our own projects or needs, for they are important to us and in frequent use.

3.2.4.3 The background of familiarity

There is, however, a part of our mental background which is rarely recalled to the stream of consciousness and that seems to be in the recesses permanently. We could call it the background of familiarity. This is quite different from the kind of background discussed so far. Something that I do repeatedly, daily or even more often, no longer captures my attention. I take it for granted. The many times I have posted letters in one particular letterbox somehow coalesce in my mind into one generalised letter-posting pattern. Presumably, I reinforce it each time I post a letter, but I do not do so consciously, nor do I clutter up my mental networks by adding fresh detail on each occasion. The route to the letterbox and the actions required in posting are definitely background matters. Yet the fact that I know the route to the letterbox and do not have to think it out afresh every time shows that this background material is still available for use, even although not in the main stream of consciousness. And there are other backgrounded facts so familiar that they form a totally unquestioned part of my mental make-up—that if I drop a cup it falls to the ground, for instance, or that I read a line of print from left to right, or that water is wet.

Such familiar mental content has an important part to play in communication. First, it leaves us free to concentrate on what is new, or important, or both: not every detail of every day needs to be mentally recorded. Instead, we observe and communicate the unfamiliar, the significant material. At a subconscious level, then, we are constantly selecting, and we do so against a background that is completely familiar.

Second, this familiar background provides us with the means to interpret our present experience without even being aware of doing so. We evaluate people or situations against a background of long-standing expectations. When I go shopping I assume that the butcher will speak to me in English, that the falling rain will wet me, and that quickly moving vehicles are dangerous. Such assumptions make normal communication possible. Our cyclist could not have communicated by saying, “Bother! Punctures! Both tyres!” if he had had to explain that tyres have air in them, that they are made of material that can be penetrated by sharp objects, that bicycles are uncomfortable to ride if the air escapes, and so on.

We need to be aware, as linguists, that every human being brings to the sending and receiving of messages a vast background of facts, abilities, and familiar assumptions. Within any given language community there is widespread consensus (due to shared experiences and shared purposes) as to what needs to be mentioned and what does not. What is omitted is significant, as well as what is said.

The ability to foreground and background the material of our mental networks, then, gives rise to various operations that play an essential part in communication. We have mentioned two here: selection and assumption. Others will be discussed in later chapters.

Suggestions for further study

1. Is there a man behind the message?

Debate rages as to whether the mind, foundational to communication, is anything more than a machine. For the machine, contenders are Dawkins, 1976; Dennett, 1992. See also Blakemore, 1988:ix, 228ff. Dawkins and Dennett are opposed by Rose (1997), who shares their position of scientific materialism, but not their determinism and reductionism. For the mind (Ego, selfhood, Central Meaner, or more than any of these) see Lakoff, 1987:269–303, Pike, 1967: passim; 1993:vii-xii, 1–14, 63–78; Searle, 1983:vii–x, 1–36, 160–79, 262–72; 1984:42–56, 66–99. Of these, Searle (1983) is definitely not for beginners. Pike (1993) and Searle (1984) are directed to a wide audience and make a good starting point. Dascal (1983:57ff) summarises and evaluates the position presented in Searle (1980). For a brief, though rather technical, summary of the mind-as-machine argument, see Cunningham, 1989. Deacon (1997) presents an alternative to the whole mind/machine controversy—passim, but see especially 442ff.

2. Purposiveness in communication (section 3.1)

The whole of this section owes much to J. L. Austin and John Searle: see Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979:1–29, 178–79. The “speech act” tradition which they established is at the heart of the modern interest in language-as-communication; for a brief introduction see Crystal, 1987:121.

3. “Frames” and conceptual organisation (section 3.2.1)

There are differences in terminology here, but much general agreement. For discussion on how conceptual material is organised, see Fillmore, 1982 and 1985; Lakoff, 1987: 20–21, 68–71, 116–17, 269–303; Schank and Abelson, 1977; Snell-Hornby, 1988:79–84.

4. Network and background (sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.4)

These sections derive largely from the work of J. R. Searle. See Searle, 1983:19–21, 141–59. For discussion of Searle’s view, see Johnson, 1987:178–90.

5. For discussion

Discuss the-mind-as-a-machine in the light of the following quotations.

1. Matter and Mind

Matter alone will not do.

Heart will sue

If neglected.

Heart, alone, is sad.

Mind, if neglected,

Is mad.

‘Nothing but’ is death,

Or hyperbole

Out of breath.

Matter and mind—

Tie them up tight,

Package them right.

K. L. Pike (1997:33)

2. “If there isn’t a Central Meaner, where does the meaning come from? . . . (from) multiple channels in which specialist circuits try, in parallel pandemoniums, to do their various things . . .” Dennett, 1991:231, 253. “A big clever thing from a lot of small stupid things.” Marvin Minsky, BBC Radio 3, 2 April 1988.

3. Lakoff, on the researchers in artificial intelligence who really believe the mind-as-machine paradigm: “They are simply wrong.” (1987:343).

4

PERSON TO PERSON

4.1 Before speech starts: the shared situation

4.1.1 Place and time

4.1.2 Social orientation

4.1.3 Specific situational cues

4.2 Before speech starts: the participants’ mutual awareness

4.3 While communication flows: the monitoring process

4.3.1 Monitoring the hearer’s knowledge

4.3.2 Monitoring the hearer’s comprehension

4.3.3 Monitoring the hearer’s reactions

4.3.4 Monitoring social factors

4.4 Situations involving multiple participants

4.4.1 Multiple participants in a shared situation

4.4.2 Multiple participants in partially shared situations

4.4.2.1 Messages involving different places

4.4.2.2 Messages involving different places and times

4.4.2.3 Messages reaching unintended recipients

Our study so far has focused on the speaker. But of course all communication involves at least a speaker and a hearer, or rather it involves at least two people, who in normal conversation adopt the roles of speaker and hearer in turn. In this chapter we are going to consider the factors relevant to such communication.

4.1 Before speech starts: the shared situation

The first thing to notice is that communicating people share a present chunk of experience and know that they do. In face-to-face speech, which is the norm, the people involved are in the same place, at the same time, and most often for a common purpose or with common interests. They are usually aware not only of their own particular roles in the situation but also of the corresponding roles of all the other participants. All are likely to have very similar foregrounded frames, which will include shared time and location, shared awareness of each other, and numerous social factors.

It must not be thought that all this is entirely, or even mainly, conscious. It is not even one of the “half-thoughts” and “shadowy memories” lurking in the wings. My awareness of being “I,” for instance, is buried deep below introspection, and my awareness of relating to other humans like myself is almost as deep. Such subconscious awareness surfaces from time to time in conversation, but is always present even when the attention is directed elsewhere.

4.1.1 Place and time

The awareness of the here and now is, like self-awareness, a pervasive but usually hidden factor, more like mental ambience than mental furniture. The bewilderment one feels on waking up in a strange bedroom, the long dark seconds while confusion sorts itself out in the mental recesses, the sudden clicking of everything into place (“Ah, I remember! I’m at Jane’s, of course!”)—this common experience bears witness to the sheer necessity of our existence, that if we are conscious, we must be consciously located somewhere.

And similarly with time. Those who, through illness or accident, have got out of step with the march of the days, enquire anxiously and at the earliest opportunity, “What day is it? What happened?” And often the loss of days and nights is hard to adjust to. The person concerned has to discuss the lost time, ask questions, and in other ways reset the inward clock.

Clearly I am not I-in-isolation, I am I-here-now, talking to you-here-now. In other words, we do not think about here and now—they are normally the infrastructure of our thinking, not its objects, providing an essential substrate for all communication.

4.1.2 Social orientation

Superimposed on the shared here and now, and nearer the foreground, is a large amount of other shared material—the details of the surroundings, relevant events both recent and more distant, shared plans and purposes. Moreover, people engaged in joint social activity share another awareness which lies well below the surface: the instinctive attitudinal stance of knowing how to behave in a given circumstance. Each knows, for the given situation, who may speak and who may not, what topics are relevant, what degree of formality or casualness is required, how long the conversation may reasonably continue. And this fundamental “how-to” is something that undergoes constant inward adjustment during the day, as we move from one activity to another. Like our inward time and place orientation, this subconscious social orientation constantly supplies our conscious self with the means of structuring our activities and our conversations.

As with other deeply hidden parts of our being, we often become conscious of our social how-to orientation only when it is lost or disturbed. There can be a feeling of controlled panic as we face a totally new situation: we often seek advice and information from others whose how-to is at this point better equipped than our own. “What should I say when I go in? Should I sit down? What should I wear?” Discomfort becomes even more acute when there is no one to ask, or no language to ask in. Part of the emotional and psychological stress labelled culture shock consists precisely in this: in going into an unfamiliar culture, as a participant, not a tourist, and not knowing “how to” join in. The infrastructure is lacking.

4.1.3 Specific situational cues

In addition to the participants’ shared place, time, and social orientation, many other specific factors in their situation give rise to further shared ground on which the communication may build. These factors are not, however, consciously acknowledged as such. Rather, they serve as situational cues to foreground not only social stances, as discussed, but also whole conceptual fields of specialised knowledge, experience, and attitude. Thus if the conversation is taking place in a college seminar room, then one associated field is to the fore; if in a church hall, another quite different field; if on a moorland road, in a sitting room, or on a commuter train, different fields again. On the moorland road, for instance, the weather is likely to be foregrounded, whereas in the sitting room it will be only of incidental interest.

Strictly speaking, however, it is not simply the location that triggers off these areas of awareness, but the purposive element in the situation. After all, a seminar room may be the venue for a meeting of the Christian Union, and a church hall may be used for a toddlers’ play group. On such occasions the physical location is less important than the shared purposes of the participants: it is my “Christian” frame rather than my “academic” one that comes to the fore, or my “toddler” frame rather than my “church activities” one. Thus before a word is uttered, before fellow participants are necessarily identified, a complex of factors have combined to provide each person concerned with the comforting feeling of knowing where he is and what he is doing, of being at home in his setting. And this is a very substantial shared base on which a conversation can be built.

Of course, mistakes may occur. Someone may come to the seminar room expecting a lecture and find himself in a prayer meeting. But such mismatches between person and setting normally result in retreat rather than in skewed conversations. For the genuine and purposive introduction of any stranger into a new social setting, there are recognised conversational and social strategies to ease him in gently and relate him to the other participants and events. There are introductions, explanations, preview of planned activities, etc. But where the participants are in familiar settings, with shared purposes, the amount of common ground is considerable.

The importance of all this will become more obvious when we turn to the study of verbalisation and the construction of messages. Meantime, it is enough to grasp firmly the fact that communication does not take place in a vacuum but in a world of shared experiences focused in the here and now. Communication starts from a shared base.

4.2 Before speech starts: the participants’ mutual awareness

In the preceding section we discussed the elements in a situation that provide a base for participants in a conversation simply by virtue of their being in a certain place at a certain time with a certain purpose. But this shared situational base is largely hidden from those who are communicating, just as one is largely unaware of the chair in which one sits or the spectacles through which one reads.

The participants in a conversation are much more aware of each other than of background factors. Whether they meet on the street, or in the course of business, or in the home, there is normally a second or two before verbal communication starts. And in that moment of time the participants identify each other as known or unknown, assess the situation, and ready themselves to speak appropriately.

If the other participant is unknown to us, we react to visual and other clues, make apparently instantaneous deductions about his probable characteristics, and launch the conversation accordingly. But even if he is known to us, we do not simply recognise him, identify him, and start to talk. For with the recognition, a whole area of memories is opened up, especially if we have known the person well. We remember past incidents; we remember his character; we remember facts such as his occupation, his home and family, his hobbies. It is not that we consciously think of these things as we stretch out our hand in greeting; rather, they are available, ready of access, and we are aware that it is so. If we recognise the face but fail to foreground the needed information, the outstretched hand is a rather uncertain one.

Nor must we think that our minds store only facts and specific incidents. Just as important, we somehow store attitudes, which are resurrected unbidden in the moment of recognition. We like or dislike this man, trust him or have reservations, love him or resent him, as we did in the past. We also know, without having to think about it, whether he has the same sense of humour that we have, whether he stands on his dignity, whether he is genuine or hides behind words. And with our mind thus alerted and stored attitudes reactivated, we are ready to speak.

He, meantime, has gone through the same process concerning us. And if we know each other really well, then the lit-up areas of the mind are extensive and the shared base of the conversation is very large. However, even if the people starting to converse are strangers to each other, that does not mean that there is no common base at all. Almost certainly the locational setting will provide clues as to areas shared in common. Age, sex, dress, and facial expression also act as pointers. Provided the conversation progresses beyond the conventional initiating sequences, common ground will be consciously sought and probably found. It seems as if broadening our base of understanding is something that we do instinctively, one of the inbuilt and permanent purposes of our lives. And occasionally, in our fumbling explorations of each other’s beings, we stumble on a person or a group of people whose inner lives march to the same rhythm as our own. At such times, perhaps, communication has fulfilled one of its most vital functions: we started by sharing common ground, we finish by sharing each other.

4.3 While communication flows: the monitoring process

The mutual awareness with which a conversation starts continues as long as the conversation itself. Speaker and hearer appear to concentrate their attention on what is being said, yet at another level they are constantly aware of each other.

4.3.1 Monitoring the hearer’s knowledge

If the speaker knows that the hearer is already in possession of certain facts, he refers to such prior knowledge using quite different linguistic forms from those he would otherwise use. He says “the policeman” if the listener already knows which policeman is being referred to, but “a policeman” if he does not.

The difference lies in the estimated availability of the information to the hearer. The speaker monitors the hearer’s knowledge constantly as he presents his message; the hearer constructs an appropriate mental scene as he receives it. So the use of the definite “the policeman” signals to the hearer that this policeman is already part of the scene under construction; the use of the indefinite “a policeman” signals the introduction of a new character, not in the existing scene.

Frequently information signalled as known will already have been mentioned, perhaps more than once, in the earlier part of the communication. But this is not necessarily the case. I may say, for instance, “Jon drove into a lamppost and smashed the right headlamp.” In this example, I refer to the headlamp as if it were known information, although I have in fact not even mentioned a car overtly. But the mere mention of “Jon drove” is enough to foreground cars, even a specific car, and cars are known to have headlamps. So it is not a case of determining that something is new or known by virtue of explicit mention; it has to be determined in terms of foregrounded mental scene.

This categorising of information into new or known, for purposes of presentation, is not confined to unknown or known people or objects. Facts also can be presented as new or known. Kasem (in northern Ghana) has several ways of expressing the English “because,” and one major factor in determining which of these to use is whether or not the fact under discussion is already familiar to the listeners: familiar facts are generally presented in subordinate clauses, new ones in main clauses. Indeed, we approach something close to this in English. Although “because” can refer to information of any sort, the phrase “in view of the fact that” is normally used to introduce a fact already known to the hearer.

Every language may be presumed to have its own ways of handling this “prior knowledge” factor, but it still needs much more investigation. What is of relevance to us here is that throughout a conversation each speaker in turn is constantly monitoring his hearer, assessing, among other things, what is already known to him and what is not.

It is interesting to note that although people are quite unconscious of the new-known distinction as a factor in the way they speak, they nevertheless make fairly frequent mention of their own or their hearer’s state of knowledge. They say, “Have you heard that . . . ?” or “I’m sorry, I thought you knew,” or “I never realised . . . ,” making explicit the fact that they are in some sense tracking each other as they go along. It would be wrong to think of these side comments as on a par with the information-bearing parts of the utterance. Statements such as “I hadn’t heard (that X . . .),” or “I thought you knew (that Y . . .)” are presumably true and are to that extent informative. But they do not inform the hearer about the matter in hand; they inform him about me, which is quite different. “I hadn’t heard . . .” corrects a mistaken monitoring of my knowledge-store on his part, and lets him know that I was unaware of something he had assumed I knew. “I thought you knew . . .” is a virtual apology on my part for a mistaken monitoring of his knowledge-store. I had assumed that he knew Y when he didn’t, so had mistakenly presented Y as known.

It is interesting that we are (at least in English, and I suspect more widely) unable to gloss over monitoring errors as if they were unimportant: they have to be made explicit and corrected before conversation can resume its normal flow. Such explanatory comments are verbalisations, not of the informing process, but of the monitoring process.

4.3.2 Monitoring the hearer’s comprehension

It would be a mistake to think of human beings as simply knowledge-exchanging machines. In conversation, our awareness of each other is by no means limited to what we respectively know. We are sensitive to numerous other factors at the same time: whether we are communicating clearly, for instance; whether we are making a good impression; whether our hearer is bored or enthusiastic.

A speaker is constantly assessing whether or not his message is getting across. He is alert even to faint muscular tensions or facial expressions of uncertainty indicating that the hearer has not heard properly or is puzzled or out of his depth. And if the speaker receives such signals, he slows down the information rate, perhaps by providing illustrations or repeating himself in other words, as seems appropriate. Sometimes, of course, the hearer himself says openly that he is having difficulty in understanding or in keeping up the pace. He may say, “Hey, hey! Not so fast! What was that you were saying about X?” pinpointing where his confusion started. In more formal situations he may say, “I’m not sure that I quite followed what you said about X.” Usually the speaker does not need these verbal indications; the unspoken signals are enough.

4.3.3 Monitoring the hearer’s reactions

In addition to monitoring comprehension, the speaker simultaneously monitors the hearer’s reaction to the message. Thus he is aware when what he says is boring to the hearer, or amusing, or irritating. He is particularly sensitive to any emotional changes the hearer may show, especially changes indicating disbelief or disagreement. If there are signals indicative of a clash of values, he either changes the subject, or speaks less confrontationally; he may perhaps continue to express his opinion but with a rider, such as, “I’m sorry, I know you don’t agree with this, but . . .” In other words, the speaker is constantly evaluating the effect that his message is having on the hearer.

The way people react affects how we express ourselves, whether eagerly or hesitantly, curtly or expansively. We warm to someone who is obviously friendly, but speak with more caution if the listener is cool and distant towards us. Similar emotional factors also affect the way an utterance is understood: a tired or discouraged person, for instance, will understand insults where none are intended.

We are also alert to the purposes other people have when they are conversing with us. It does not satisfy us that we simply understand what they are saying: we need to know with what purpose they are saying it. And if this purpose is not clear to us we may say so openly: “I’m not sure what you’re driving at,” “So where is this taking us?” or “Why do you ask that?” Uncertainty as to the purposes of the other parties involved makes for awkwardness, hesitancy in interpreting comments, and so on. Conversation can flow naturally and freely only in the context of some area of shared purpose.

4.3.4 Monitoring social factors

So far, we have seen that when communicating, two people monitor each other with respect to their prior knowledge, their comprehension, and their emotions, values and purposes. But there is another important dimension of shared awareness: those engaged in the communication are aware of each other as social beings with a common social background. Speakers are aware of whether they are addressing social equals or those who are reckoned by society as their superiors or inferiors.

In the light of this social context, of which both speaker and hearer are fully aware, an utterance may have a significance far beyond what is conveyed by the words alone. Thus if I say to a social equal, “You were late for work today,” I am likely to be making an emotionally neutral comment initiating a new topic and seeking some explanation of an unusual occurrence. But if I say the same thing to someone in a subordinate position, for instance, an employee, then it will be rightly understood as a rebuke. If, however, I am speaking to someone who is my social superior, then I will, if I am wise, refrain from mentioning his lateness at all. Some things are appropriate to say, and some are not. In other words, whether to express one’s thoughts and how to express them both bear a direct relationship to the social situation of the speakers within a given culture.

The speakers’ social relationship also dictates the degree of initiative they are free to show in directing discussion. The introduction of a new topic may not be done on any occasion by any person: there are conditions of appropriateness which govern this. And once a topic is introduced there is a social constraint on the hearer to respond; he may not simply ignore it. Who may socially take the initiative and who at any given time is in a responding role are social considerations which communicating adults constantly observe, whether in the classroom, the committee room, or at their own firesides. And whether one is initiating or responding has a considerable effect on the wording of the message being conveyed.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that while we are monitoring each other in these various respects, we are also in some way comparing this person as he now presents himself to us with this person as he appears in our knowledge frame. Perhaps “comparing” is too strong a term: very often we are simply overlaying and strengthening our previous perceptions of the person. But if he expresses himself in any way that surprises us, we will almost invariably comment on it. We say, “But that isn’t like you!” or “You can’t really believe that!” or “But I thought you liked so-and-so!” And the fact that we are surprised shows that we had a mental expectation which has not been fulfilled—we have been assessing the speaker as well as the speech.

4.4 Situations involving multiple participants

A communication situation consisting of two people exhibits clearly the wide variety of factors underlying and permeating every conversation. But most communications are not quite so private. Let us now consider more complex situations involving more than two people.

4.4.1 Multiple participants in a shared situation

First, we shall consider the case where several participants are present on one shared occasion. All that has been said about here-now orientation, social awareness, and purposive setting is still relevant. It is in the area of person-to-person monitoring that differences emerge.

Little change is to be noted when the numbers involved are small. A speaker seems able to monitor the reactions of two people in much the same way as one, being aware of the knowledge, values and purposes of both.. This is particularly true if he knows them well: a child very early learns to assess which of two wavering parents is likely to accede to his request, and he adjusts his approach accordingly. But even when the people concerned are strangers to each other, no serious monitoring difficulties are encountered. For example, if two people hitherto unknown to each other are conducting an interview, they seem to have little difficulty in monitoring both the interviewee and their fellow interviewer at the same time. Thus, one of them may become aware that the other interviewer is biased in some respect, or hesitant in a particular area, even while his attention is apparently focused on the applicant.

As soon as more people are involved, however, and especially if they do not know each other well, the monitoring processes undergo modification. Obviously public speakers cannot be fully aware of the knowledge of the individuals in an audience. They therefore have to allow for a fairly wide spectrum of knowledge, even in a relatively homogeneous audience. Likewise, they cannot be aware of individual feedback to the same extent as in a two-or-three-participant situation. Most public speakers, and all good ones, are constantly aware of audience feedback, but this is at a general level; they are not in a position to assess and evaluate individual responses.

Now, this general awareness derives its content from various sources. In particular, anyone speaking to a group of strangers is aware of the purpose of their gathering, of their shared interests, and of their shared values with respect to the matter in hand. Taken together, these constitute a very substantial basis for communication. People who have this much in common can be addressed, essentially, as one person. All the elements essential to personal conversation are still there: awareness of the addressee’s background of knowledge, value systems, and purposes. It is just that this awareness is generalised rather than related to an individual.

The picture changes, however, as soon as the speaker faces an audience that is not homogeneous. If a large group of hecklers is present, or if the situation is a debate with a strongly divided audience, the speaker has two opposing sets of values and purposes to bear in mind.

And this applies equally to casual situations. If a group of friends are chatting and a stranger joins them, the social framework and the monitoring situation are both thereby changed. The friends face several alternatives. They may change the subject to involve the stranger. Alternatively, they may continue their chat, effectively though not deliberately ignoring the stranger, excluding from their consideration both his prior knowledge and his present feelings—which are probably, at this point, ones of social discomfort. Or they may try to clue the stranger in to their subject matter, thus officially including him. If he is, in fact, very ignorant of what they are talking about, clueing him in may be only partially successful: they may ease away any social discomfort, but still he may be unable to join in.

Attempts to integrate into a communication situation individuals who are very different in their background knowledge or values almost always result in disjointed or awkward communication patterns. The fundamentals of a coherent and flowing discourse are lacking, and the main thrust of the conversation or speech has to be constantly interrupted for purposes of explanation, appeasement, or confrontation.

4.4.2 Multiple participants in partially shared situations

We are now in a position to consider those situations in which the participants do not share the here and now. Typical situations involve either a dislocation of place only or a dislocation of both place and time.

4.4.2.1 Messages involving different places

Broadcasting involves speakers and hearers in widely separated locations. This is a very modern speech situation which introduces hitherto unknown factors. Assuming a live broadcast, not a recorded one, speaker and hearers share a now but not a here. The hearers may be in hundreds of places, spread over several countries or even continents: the potential audience is vast. The speaker can no longer assume common knowledge, values, or purposes. His approach, therefore, has to be much more general; he may have to include much more explanation, speak less emotionally, slow down his information rate, modify his accent. The monitoring situation has also changed. He cannot monitor his audience; he has to envisage them in his mind and perform an estimated monitoring process to replace the normal one. Notice, however, that monitoring does not cease just because it is an estimate. Notice, also, that although the speaker cannot monitor the hearers, the hearers can still, to some extent, monitor him—aurally if the medium is radio, visually also if the medium is television.

4.4.2.2 Messages involving different places and times

The broadcasting situation has arisen only in this century and has resulted in communications dislocated from the norm in respect of the place of the participants. Another situation, which gives rise to communications dislocated in time as well as space, has existed ever since writing was invented. (That, for some cultures, takes us back millennia rather than centuries.) A person writing a message normally does so with recipients in mind who are neither here nor now. Normal communication criteria are relevant, but with appropriate modifications. If the recipients are known and the message will be conveyed in a known length of time (e.g., by post or personal messenger), then the sender can deduce roughly the time when the message will arrive. This establishes the relative nows, since both sender and recipients can allow for the time gap.

The sender who knows his recipients does not have to generalise nearly as much as the broadcaster. He has stored memories of the people to whom he is writing, including their knowledge, beliefs, values, and purposes. He can thus send a personal message that lacks only the elements of hereness and feedback, but is in other ways similar to one side of a person-to-person conversation.

The situation is different with a written message intended for an unknown and general audience. This resembles the broadcasting situation: the recipients have to be envisaged, their prior knowledge and feedback estimated. But the lack of a shared here and now does not seriously hinder communication, provided writer and recipients are operating within a shared cultural milieu, which is normally the case where the language is shared. The common cultural base may be quite specific: the audience who reads a company report will be more restricted than the audience who reads a newspaper, and this difference shows in both subject matter and style.

4.4.2.3 Messages reaching unintended recipients

Sometimes a message may reach recipients who were not in any way envisaged by the original speaker or writer. Such unintentional communications hardly qualify as communications at all, in the strict sense. A communication is essentially hearer-oriented, that is, addressed to a specific audience. Any unintended audience comes in as an unmonitored hearer: his previous knowledge and present reactions are not allowed for, and he himself may be perplexed at various points by a message intended for an audience very different from himself. These problems are obviously much less acute when the original communication was general in nature and intended for a wide audience. But they can be highly acute when the communication was a personal one, with much shared background assumed.

Both spoken and written communications may reach an unintended audience. For instance, since voices can be recorded and played back at a later date, a message such as a speech at a rally or a sermon in church may reach totally unexpected recipients. Normally, a speaker is concerned only with the audience in front of him. His awareness that he is being recorded is probably marginal, and his awareness of further audiences nonexistent. From the hearer’s point of view, the interpretation of such general messages usually causes little problem, provided that the replay is introduced with adequate time/space orientation and the cultural milieu is shared. (The shared area of culture can be quite specific. In Ghana I found that lads with middle-school English were much better able to understand a broadcast about boxing than I. I was culturally closer to the broadcaster, but my specific knowledge about boxing was far less than theirs.)

However, the possibilities presented by recording and broadcasting are often weighted against real fairness to the speaker. A ten-second broadcast from a speech, for instance, inevitably presents an excerpt out of context. Moreover, any speaker presents an emotionally charged speech very differently to sympathisers than he would to a critical audience: recording does not permit the liberty of adapting a presentation to unintended hearers. The result is that the message reaches a secondary audience in a form that is, in effect, unmonitored, and that undoubtedly differs considerably from the way in which the speaker would have addressed them directly.

A similar “eavesdropping” situation arises when a written document is translated for an audience in no way envisaged by the original writer. The issues involved are immense. Since this is not a book on translation theory, we will make no attempt to tackle them here. We would, however, counsel caution in approaching the problems raised by cross-language, unmonitored message transfer. Any such dislocated communication situation is off-norm when compared with regular speech or writing. It would therefore be unwise to attempt a serious theoretical approach to the issues involved without the prior establishment of an adequate theory of normal communication. The norm must be established first.

Suggestions for further study

1. The interaction of participants in conversation

For an introductory discussion see Crystal, 1987:52, 116–18. Essential reading on the maxims governing the content of conversational exchanges is Grice, 1975. Among many later discussions of the maxims, see Baker (1992) for clear and readable comments (pp. 223–28), and for debate as to whether or not they are universal (pp. 232–38). For a discussion presenting a related but different view see Sperber & Wilson 1986:31–38, 158–163, 200–1. Schiffrin (1994) discusses spoken discourses from a variety of viewpoints: for discussion of Grice see especially pp. 190–97, 352–53.

Sociology has provided an impetus for the study of the turn-taking component in conversations. The most detailed studies have been of restricted social situations such as the classroom, the doctor’s surgery, the interview. See Brown & Yule, 1983:3–4, 104–05, 230–31; Coulthard & Montgomery (eds.) 1981; Hasan in Part B of Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Levelt, 1989:31–35; Schiffrin, 1994:106–33; Ventola, 1987.

2. Given/accessible/assumed knowledge (section 4.3.1)

A key article is Chafe (1976). See also Brown & Yule, 1983:169–89, 236–50; Chafe, 1992:268–71; Givón, 1984:246–67, 897–900. For briefer comments see Bruner, 1986:84; Johnson-Laird, 1983:371. For a discussion distinguishing old/new (in the discourse) from old/new (to the hearer), see Prince, 1992.

3. Multiple participants in partially shared situations (section 4.4.2)

Bell (1991) provides a well-documented and readable study of the language of the news media: on participant roles, see especially pp. 85–92. See also Goffman, 1981:197–330.

4. Monitoring (section 4.3)

Monitoring is rarely mentioned overtly in the analysis of conversations, but it is frequently assumed in discussions of the conversational maxims and of information status (see above). It plays an obvious part in the conversations analysed in Brown & Yule, 1983:83–94. “Discourse is produced as an interaction between two perspectives, that of the speaker and that of the hearer. The interaction occurs in the mind of both participants. Each, in addition to his/her own perspective, also attempts to construe some model of the other’s perspective.” Givón, 1984:897 (my italics). See also Chafe 1979:167: “a speaker . . . not only has things to say . . . but . . . is also at the same time constantly concerned with how well what is being said is getting these things across . . . communicating to another mind what is in the speaker’s mind.”

5

THINGS, THOUGHTS, AND WORDS:

MOSTLY THOUGHTS

5.1 How do words relate to the world?

5.2 The traditional view of concepts

5.3 An alternative approach: concepts as habitual events

5.4 The origins of conceptual events

5.4.1 Concepts originating from outside ourselves

5.4.2 Concepts originating from within ourselves

5.4.3 Concepts derived by abstraction

5.4.4 Concepts and the community

5.5 The structure of conceptual events

5.5.1 The firm central core of concepts

5.5.2 Concepts and their contexts

5.5.3 The boundaries of concepts

5.5.3.1 The existence of fuzzy boundaries

5.5.3.2 Problems caused by fuzzy boundaries

5.5.4 Concepts as units

5.6 Concepts in use

5.7 Concepts and the real world

5.7.1 Concepts and the nature of reference

5.7.2 Some problems revisited

5.7.3 Different ways of conceptualising

We are now in a position to address once more the problem with which we started: how do speech sounds convey meanings?

5.1 How do words relate to the world?

In the first chapter we saw that words and meanings are by no means in one-to-one correspondence. One word, viewed as an isolate, may have many meanings. On the other hand, a word in a context has only one meaning. And, in fact, any meaning may be expressed in a variety of different ways, not simply by the word or words used on a particular occasion. In the attempt to disentangle this confused situation, some technical terminology has been introduced already. The different meanings a word may have are called its senses, and a word like “band,” as already pointed out, has several senses. On any given occasion, a word is used in one specific sense only, and its actual meaning on this occasion—the real-world situation which it is signalling—is called its reference.

We earlier used the example “Successive bands of rain are crossing the country from west to east,” and this will serve once more to illustrate the terminology introduced here. The word “bands” is used in one of its senses only, the sense of long, narrow shape. The word “country” is also used in one sense only, that of a national and geographical unit. As used in the example, these words refer to particular configurations of rain crossing Britain on a particular day.

Thus far, however, we seem to have been more successful in showing how words do not relate to meaning than how they do. True, we have succeeded in showing that words relate to the referential world one sense at a time. But this does not explain how quite different words and phrases can have the same meaning (i.e., reference). We may say that “house” and “dwelling” mean the same, because we can point to one object, and call it either. But how do we know that “Please sit down” and “Do take a seat” mean the same? Or that “She failed to come back” and “She didn’t return” mean the same also? These paired utterances have virtually no lexical items in common, yet we immediately recognise their sameness of reference. How do we do it?

We began to lay the groundwork for answering these questions in chapter 3, where we explored a little of the way man’s mind is structured. We saw how man experiences the world around him by means of his senses and retains a conceptual recollection of all that has happened to him, though mostly in a generalised way and below the level of consciousness. We also saw how those recollections are organised in complex groupings which exhibit coherence both internally and in their relationships with each other; they are stored away out of sight a great deal of the time yet are always “on call” and available for use.

But this has told us only how the world around us penetrates and permeates our thinking. Words, so far, have not come into it. How do words relate to the real world we experience? How, for that matter, do they relate to our thoughts? Bearing in mind that our purpose is to analyse the meaning expressed in messages, and that messages consist of sequences of words, it is essential that we tackle these questions. What is the connection between a stream of words and the world they refer to?

Obviously, the world around us does not present itself to us neatly labelled. Buildings do not come with a tag saying “house” (or “maison” or “casa,” etc.), and animals do not have a label attached to their collars saying “dog.” The word used to signal a real-world object is completely arbitrary: the only necessity is that everyone in a given speech community use the same word so that they can understand each other—which is exactly what happens.

Since there is no inherent connection between the word “house” and actual houses, it seems obvious to look for the connection among the mental furniture of the people who use the words. We interpose a person’s thought processes between the word and the object it refers to in order to connect the two. This seems very sensible, because it is a person who is thinking about a real-world house when he says the word “house.” He performs the link between the two diverse objects in his own thinking. And since there is an unspoken agreement between the members of any one community that they will all use this word “house” when they think of that particular object, communication using words becomes possible.

So we build up a connection between words, concepts, and things, giving the name “concept” to that thought in our minds which is the mental correlate of the object out there in the world, and of which the word or phrase is the spoken (or written) signal. The concept then has an essential bridging role between things in the world and the words we use to designate them. In this chapter we concentrate our attention on the nature of these mental bridges, and in the next will consider how words are associated with them.

5.2 The traditional view of concepts

The traditional view of concepts is that each separate sense of a word has a concept as its mental correlate. This concept has sometimes been considered to be a sort of visual image, sometimes more like a verbal image, a rather hazy generalised mental associate of a word.

The most commonly held view has been some variant of the verbal one. A word is held to signal a conceptual counterpart which provides a sort of explanatory definition for it. Thus corresponding to the word “taxi” we have the concept of car plying for hire. A word which has more than one sense will signal a different concept for each sense. The word “father” signals male parent in one of its senses, and priest of a religious order in another. A concept is highly generic (the word “father” refers to the whole class of fathers) and has only as much content as is essential to distinguish it from other concepts (e.g., to distinguish fathers from mothers, both being parents).

Assuming traditional concepts of this nature, a variety of arguments have been raised against using concepts as bridging units. First, has the introduction of concepts got us any further forward? The interposing of concepts between words and the world does not necessarily solve some of our earlier problems. In chapter 1, for example, we said that “cat” and “fish” have obvious meanings, but “the” and “of” do not. We have hardly helped matters by introducing concepts, for what kind of concept attaches to “of” and what kind of object in the real world would that concept relate to? Obviously, none. As the mental correlate of a word, a concept seems liable to exactly the same problems and difficulties as the word itself.

Second, when we relate words to the referential world via the concepts in our heads, we raise queries about the exact nature of the relationship between the words and the concepts. Everyone seems agreed that a word is some kind of a signal, but is it signalling our concept of a house, or the house itself? We feel when we say “house,” that we are signalling a real out-there-in-the-world house, yet this is a view which we have already rejected (see section 1.2). The alternative, that the word signals not the house itself but our concept of it, is counterintuitive. The suggestion that we are spending our lives talking about our thoughts seems ludicrous. In what way, then, do words as signals operate?

The difficulty in defining the relationship between words and concepts is matched by an equal difficulty when we try to relate concepts to actual objects. For I can never be aware of a real-world house except in my thoughts, by way of sense impressions. I can never step outside myself and examine an actual house objectively so as to compare my concept of a house with it. The concept, which we hoped to use as a bridge between words and objects, seems doomed to fall perpetually short of its target on the real-world side.

Further, this approach seems to take a rather indefensible leap in the dark. The word “house” is a signal agreed on by a whole community for use on all sorts of occasions in connection with houses; it is highly generic. And if words relate to mental concepts then these concepts should presumably also be generic. Yet we frequently use words very specifically: we think of specific houses. In some way we have to bridge the gulf between highly generic words on the one hand and highly specific references on the other. But is a word-related, generic concept able to do so?

Finally, a problem arises concerning the many details about the real world with which we are familiar in daily life. For example, one concept attaching to the word “father” is priest of a religious order: how does this concept relate to all the details which we associate with priests—their functions, dress, marital status, etc.? We do have all these details somewhere in our heads, so it begins to look as if we have to posit a further mental layer between concepts and real-world objects, in order to accommodate the richness of detail appropriate to each concept.

The above arguments have all been advanced at different times against using the concept as a mental bridging unit. Almost all of them assume in effect that concepts differ very little from the words with which they correlate, except that they are made of mental stuff rather than of sounds. The argument that generic concepts cannot provide a link with specific objects assumes that concepts are as generic as words are. The demand for a separate mental location for all the detail we associate with words is based on the prior assumption that concepts consist essentially of rather simple definitions (e.g., priest of a religious order), which obviously leave much unsaid. Perhaps we might be more successful with our mental bridges if they were not quite so wordlike themselves.

5.3 An alternative approach: concepts as habitual events

There is an alternative approach. I am going to suggest that the problem, as presented in the preceding section (5.2), is insoluble, because it is based on a false picture of what is really going on. It assumes that three kinds of entities are involved: entities that are verbal, entities that are conceptual, and entities that are in the real world. But in communication we are not dealing with entities as much as with habits: habits of speech, habits of thought, habitual ways of viewing the world around us. (Entities, of course, do exist. I am not abandoning the common-sense view that the world-out-there exists and that personal beings inhabit it. I am saying that language and communication are grounded more in habits than in entities as such.) Rather than considering concepts as things, we should consider them as habitual events.

Defining concepts thus, as mental habits, frees us from a very restricting presupposition which has pervaded traditional studies of concepts so far: the presupposition that each word has one concept attached, that a concept is essentially self-contained and singular. Since we are now considering concepts as thought-habits, we can say that, not just one, but many conceptual events attach to “house” and “dog” and “if.” Habits, after all, are essentially multiple: one event by itself doesn’t constitute a habit, a series of similar events does. So a series of similar conceptual events attaches to “house”: we may label this a concept for convenience, but it is not thinglike, and it is multiple.

It is not, of course, uncommon to give thinglike labels to events. Words like “manoeuvre,” “birth,” and “vibration” all refer to happenings, not to objects. In a parallel way we may continue to use the word “concept,” but the fact that we use a noun must not deceive us into thinking of it as some object in our heads, a sort of thought-capsule. Rather, concepts are thought-in-action.

Postponing until the next chapter the relationship between these thought-events and the words which signal them, we need here to give more detailed attention to our conceptual habits themselves: their origins, their make-up, and how they operate in the thinking process.

5.4 The origins of conceptual events

The mental gymnastics required to rethink what we mean by “concept” should be made easier because we have already given some consideration to man’s mental make-up in chapter 3. The discussion in that chapter was nontechnical: it used terms like “experience,” “areas of knowledge,” and “thoughts,” without mentioning “concepts,” but it did present us with a picture of man as an experiencing, thinking personality, and it went into some detail as to how his thought processes are organised. We will build on that basis here.

5.4.1 Concepts originating from outside ourselves

The raw material of human knowledge and thought is sensory impressions from the outside world. From the start, a human being compares and correlates these impressions, so that all the sensory input that he receives is stored in the memory, not in a haphazard way, but in a complex network of interrelated groupings. Very early in life, for example, various kinds of dog are all recognised as being in some way related in one grouping.

This is not done simply by comparing physical characteristics such as size, shape and colour: barking, licking, eating from a bowl on the kitchen floor, tugging at the lead when walking—all these come into it. When someone has such a richly-endowed mental grouping stored and available for use we can say that they have a concept of a dog. Animals that are encountered later can then be recognised as belonging to the dog grouping; the mind reacts to the co-occurrence of a variety of familiar characteristics.

Other concepts, however, are much more complex, much less easily related to single, identifiable objects in the world around us. From early months children build up concepts of softness and hardness, of interrelationships within the family, of woolly mittens on cold days, of branches or mobiles stirred by a wind which is invisible but can be felt. All the senses contribute to the developing world view, and although the visual channel comes to dominate, all channels of sensory perception combine throughout our lives in the forming of concepts. Thus the adult concept of Christmas has, in Britain, a cold-weather component, of which we are scarcely conscious until we visit relatives in Australia at the festive season; then the clash with our sensory expectations is marked, and we cannot forbear comment.

5.4.2 Concepts originating from within ourselves

Sensory impressions are not the sole source of conceptual material. Human personalities are more than simply processors of sensory input. When we exclaim at a beautiful view, we are expressing our feelings in words, not simply processing visual images. When we say, “I know I shouldn’t pass this on, but . . . ,” the awareness that we are indeed behaving badly is a niggling but quite identifiable inward feeling, differing in quality from a simple distaste or fear of disapproval, but similar in that it is inward. Every time we say “I” (instead of referring to ourselves in the third person, which is theoretically possible), we are in some sense saying that there is an inwardness as well as an outwardness to our life, a self-awareness as well as an other-awareness.

But these inward elements of our being are capable of conceptualisation just as outward things are. We build up, through repeated experience, an inward awareness of duty or happiness or awe or pride, and we can then store or retrieve it exactly as we would some experience with a more outward origin.

Moreover, the rough and tumble of everyday life assures us that other people have inward experiences similar to our own. Inwardly based concepts are used as readily in communication as sensorily based ones. Indeed, it is often rather hard to disentangle them. My concept of horseradish sauce is accompanied by a feeling of aversion which stubbornly refuses to detach itself: objectivity is not, perhaps, a very common state of mind.

If such be the case, is not our position that sensory impressions form the basis of our conceptualising a seriously distorted one? Why give primacy to our sensory impressions at the expense of the inward aspects of our experience?

The answer lies in the very close relationship between the outward and the inward contributions to our conceptualising. It is only in the context of the world of our experience that we are aware of happiness, duty, or guilt. Such inward attitudes and experiences are always in an experiential context. “I” in a vacuum could know no happiness or pride or awe. Thus, while we should not give sensory impressions any ontological primacy, we should consider them highly important even in the analysis of things inward and subjective.

It is important to realise that many, perhaps most, of our concepts are acquired not by observation, but by participation. Developing a world-view is not a spectator sport. We build up and reinforce our conceptual store by the activities we engage in: we earn money, suffer from viruses, learn new skills, entertain friends. In this way we build up complex concepts: saving and spending money, illness and convalescence, persistent effort and frustration, and the conventions of our society. Of course, we can isolate elements of those experiences for separate consideration—we can talk of flu objectively as well as subjectively—but the raw material at the basis of our conceptualising is not the-world-out-there, but my-experienced-world.

5.4.3 Concepts derived by abstraction

We can, however, be strictly objective when we need to. For special purposes we can strip down our experiences to their very bones, as it were, and conceptualise elements from those experiences that have never presented themselves to us via our senses at all. We can talk, for instance, about one woman weighing 140 pounds and another 100, even though we have never experienced 140 pounds or 100 pounds directly. We can conceptualise numbers like 100: not 100 anythings, but just one unadorned hundred by itself. This kind of conceptualisation is something we do with more difficulty: to conceptualise a 2 + b 2 = c 2 is somehow a rather sophisticated mental activity. But obviously we have the mental capacity to start from our experiences as a base and push the boundaries of our thinking ever further back.

Some abstract concepts enter into the life and thinking of a community, so that they are used as readily as experiential concepts in everyday conversation. Other abstract ideas such as dyne or ohm remain the property of in-groups, who use the terms in the workplace but not in the supermarket or in the home. There has been a tendency in the past to think of such abstract concepts as a superior breed, with the corollary that other more down-to-earth concepts ought similarly to be purified of their associative detail: our house concept should be somehow the distillation of houseness, and so on. But in fact everyday concepts with rich associations are the norm: abstract concepts are their hard-won derivatives.

5.4.4 Concepts and the community

Most of our daily activities are performed in the context of some community, be it the family, the academic institution, the office, or the club. We therefore develop concepts of the activities in which we habitually engage: taking dictation, playing football, drawing money from the bank, cooking meals. Each of these activities is associated with its own appropriate setting, equipment, and procedures; we learn gradually how each may be acceptably performed. This, then, must give rise to concepts which are not at all static, but which trace progress through a familiar activity from beginning to end.

There is also, accompanying such concepts, an awareness that some kinds of behaviour are normative, and deviation is socially unacceptable, whereas at other points in the procedure considerable flexibility is allowed. Awareness of how others judge our actions is never far away.

Obviously, our own personal experiences are very similar to those of other members of our community. I build up my dog concept out of a succession of experiences of dogs—but taken by and large, one person’s experience of dogs is much like another’s. There is a lot of overlap in the concepts that different people build up from their individual experiences. It is this common core of community-wide experience which makes it possible to talk about the concept of a dog as if it were a single concept, when in fact it operates in many individual minds.

5.5 The structure of conceptual events

Events have structure no less than things, and it is important to explore the structure of the cognitive events we are calling concepts. We have said that concepts are multiple events: to give us the concept dog many experiences of dogs are overlaid on each other. Then, when we again think of, observe, or speak of dogs, our mind runs again over the mental track already laid down. And this event is in its turn absorbed into the concept, enriching its detail.

5.5.1 The firm central core of concepts

We do not, of course, remember each separate time we have activated a concept. Rather, the memories coalesce. We develop a general idea of dogs, or playing tennis, or whatever: each successive experience either confirms or extends our existing concept and then disappears from our conscious memory.

We must realise, however, that this general idea, this reinforced core of meaning, is not a simple, minimal concept, containing only those few characteristics which are true on all occasions of its use. If it were, the concept dog, for example, would contain only the characteristics which are common to all dogs, and similarly with all generic concepts. This raises certain difficulties: a dog may be a terrier or a poodle or a bulldog, but it must be a particular kind of dog. Similarly a game of tennis must be played by either two or four players; it is impossible to imagine an actual tennis game which is neither the one nor the other, but is a two-player/four-player game. However, we must not restrict our conceptual faculty to what our minds can readily imagine. We do in fact use concepts in a very general way; we do think of dogs and games of tennis without mentally imagining every detail. The danger is that we somehow think of this general function as the concept, rather than recognising it as only one aspect of the concepts concerned, an aspect, moreover, which is activated only under certain conditions.

The firm core of a concept, therefore, consists of a vast amount of detail, but we are not aware of all the details simultaneously. Rather, triggering a concept makes all the detail available: the situation will determine what elements come into active use. A concept does not operate on an all-or-nothing basis. Sometimes the mind pursues the conceptual track without pausing to access much detail; this happens if the concept is only being activated in passing, or in a very neutral, general context. At other times considerable detail will be accessed and carried on through the communication while the inactivated details lapse into temporary oblivion.

Concepts allow two-way traffic, from general to specific and from specific to general. The mention of dogs in general may lead me to think of a specific dog, but just as surely the appearance on the scene of a particular dog can trigger the more general concept. Either way, the firm conceptual core becomes available for use.

To say that concepts have a firm central core is to imply that they have, by contrast, less firm peripheral elements. And this is in fact the case. My sole experience of cats, for example, is with the domestic variety; wild cats lie at the margins of my cat concept, and it takes a highly specific context to activate such peripheral elements. Similarly, games of short tennis, played indoors with a short-handled racquet, are very marginal in my tennis concept. My mind is not normally drawn along that track, but sticks firmly with the much more familiar central elements. (In section 5.5.3 we will consider some of the theoretical issues relating to the conceptual periphery.)

5.5.2 Concepts and their contexts

Perhaps because words are written as separate items with gaps between, we tend to think of concepts in much the same way, as if they were self-contained capsules of meaning. But the capsule analogy is a dangerous one; concepts are not isolates. Everything we experience, we experience in a context, and that context remains a part of what our memory records.

Let us take a simple illustration. Out of varied experiences we build up a cat concept, and this brings its associations with it. To like milk, hunt birds, and have eyes that shine in the dark—these are parts of catness, not additions to it. But in our original experiences the milk, the birds, and the darkness were all parts of the situation in which the cat was central; they belonged to the context, and the context was recorded in memory along with the cat. In logic, one may envisage a cat in isolation; in experience, cats don’t come that way. Contexts cannot be disentangled from experiences.

Some contexts, of course, are less closely attached than others. I associate cats with comfortable chairs and suburban gardens, but these are not so closely attached to catness as are milk and birds. Nevertheless, this kind of context also is recorded in memory along with cats. My cat concept is at ease in the suburban-garden context in a way that it is not in schools or swimming pools or law courts. We laugh (quietly of course) when a cat walks up the aisle during a Sunday service: the inappropriateness strikes us as humorous. But it seems inappropriate only because the cat concept carries with it its own normal contexts—and church is not one of them.

Contexts, then, are not something added to concepts if required; they belong to their very nature. Concepts are inherently contextual.

5.5.3 The boundaries of concepts

If concepts are replete with detail and carry their contexts with them, does this not make it rather difficult to distinguish one concept from another? If our cat concept contains birds, and our bird concept contains flying, and our flying concept contains bees and kites and aircraft, it begins to look as if our conceptual world is in a state of riotous confusion. How can we tell where one concept ends and another begins?

5.5.3.1 The existence of fuzzy boundaries

In section 5.5.1 we discussed wild cats and short tennis as elements lying at the periphery of a concept, differing in some respects from the more familiar core. And in section 3.2.3 we pointed out that thought-units such as my family or my weekend in Paris have fuzzy boundaries. But we instinctively feel that this is not true of our concepts of physical objects, such as house or tomato; surely these concepts at least are reassuringly firm round the edges. Yet even houses shade off imperceptibly into mansions on the one hand and huts on the other. We would not normally call a workman’s hut a house, but if it was the only residence of the night watchman, and he lived and slept there, we would have to agree that it fulfilled the functions of a house. Our tomato concept really does seem to have definite boundaries—but how about a tiny, green unripe one, in the earlier stages of its development? I would certainly object if my supermarket tried to sell me those, but it would be hard to deny that they were actually tomatoes. Where does the boundary lie?

Most of the concepts we use daily (i.e., the experiential concepts, not the abstract ones) exhibit similar indeterminacy. Where does blue shade into green, for example? Or angry into furious? Or jumping into leaping? We know what we mean by old age, but when does it begin? We can certainly conceptualise last week, but did it end on Saturday or Sunday?

We are not quoting these examples in order to pull a solution out of a linguistic hat, but to show that there is no such solution. Fuzzy boundaries are a fact of our existence, and our conceptualising reflects that fact. We delude ourselves if we imagine that we could think and communicate more effectively with concepts that were more clearly bounded and self-contained: legal documents, which employ such concepts, are hardly bed-time reading for most of us. In daily use, indeterminacy of boundaries troubles us not one whit. We have a concept of running which we use readily regardless of where exactly running shades off into jogging. Our concept of tomato is made up of redness, a limited range of size and shape, and a distinctive taste, smell, and texture—plus numerous other factors relating to origin and use. The question of whether a yellow tomato, or a partially developed one, are “real” tomatoes is a side issue not normally worth pursuing. The vast majority of the time it is the central core of the concept with which we operate. “Deviant” versions such as the yellow tomato, having some but not all of the core characteristics, operate at the margins of the concept, and are called on much less frequently.

In fact, the indeterminate boundaries of concepts help rather than hinder communication: they enable us to chain thoughts together in new combinations and add greatly to the flexibility of language—I can call my modest home my palace and still mean something sensible. When I do so, however, I am operating at the boundaries of my palace concept, not at its core.

5.5.3.2 Problems caused by fuzzy boundaries

Why, then, do people still feel uneasy at the idea of fuzzy conceptual boundaries? If they work well, are even indispensable to thought as we know it, why should anyone be worried by them? There are two underlying causes of this mental unease, and both are important.

The first is this, that we want to be able to define our concepts—and traditionally, when we define something, we delineate its boundaries rather carefully. If we are unable to do so, as in this instance, we feel that something is wrong. But what is wrong lies not in the boundaries of concepts, but in our expectations. We are expecting to provide, for experiential concepts, the same kind of definition as we would for abstract ones: clear-cut, unambiguous, no-room-for-doubt definitions in terms of their contrastive features, focusing on those qualities which differentiate one concept from another. Thus, if a line has certain qualities, it is a hypotenuse; if not, then it is some other kind of line. But this kind of definition is very misleading when applied to experiential concepts, because it directs our attention away from the characteristic core of the concept to its indeterminate margins. Definitions in terms of boundaries concentrate on factors wherein one concept differs from another; definitions in terms of cores concentrate on factors which are characteristic of the concept concerned, in and of itself. My concept of cyclamen, for example, involves beautiful flowers of a very graceful shape, and is not at all concerned with the fleshy rootstock which is one of its contrastive characteristics. Experiential concepts do not need contrastive definitions but core definitions: these tend, of course, to become more like descriptions, and can be difficult to present in an orderly way. Nevertheless, these are what we need in our study of communication: the indeterminacy of boundaries is irrelevant and should not disturb us.

The second cause of our mental unease is similarly based on a false assumption. We first assume, correctly, that concepts are fundamental units in our thinking process; we then assume, wrongly, that a unit is defective or insecure if its boundaries are fuzzy. We are by now familiar with the idea that the important part of a unit is its central core, but those fuzzy boundaries still trouble us. This is probably because we are still thinking of concepts as things rather than events, and things have very clear borders: a tomato with fuzzy edges would be odd, to say the least. But more seriously, if the important part of a unit is its core, we need to have some idea of what holds it together. This will be discussed in the next section.

5.5.4 Concepts as units

What are the characteristics of a conceptual core which enable us to consider its vast diversity as unitary? It is fairly easy to see that milk and birds and suburban gardens are all part of our cat concept because they relate to actual cats. The great diversity of content is obviously bound into a unit by frequent association in everyday life. But it is harder to see wherein the unity of a concept consists if it is not centred on an actual physical object, and if it is not designated by a one-word label.

We do, of course, have many concepts which do not centre on a physical object. We can conceptualise events and situations, such as taking an examination, paying income tax, or being locked out of the house. We can conceptualise abstractions such as the boiling point of a liquid, a wedding anniversary, or the rate of inflation. In fact, it seems that we can conceptualise anything, provided that we can consider it as a unity. Now we need to dig a little deeper and ask, What factors enable us to think of taking an examination, or the rate of inflation, as a unity?

Before attempting to answer this, let us consider the problem of labelling. If there is no one-word label available, we often use a phrase to designate a single concept, as with taking an examination and rate of inflation. Once it is understood that concepts are complex, it is not difficult to accept that the verbal labels for those concepts may be complex also. It is harder, however, to grasp the fact that we have many concepts for which no verbal label, either word or phrase, is ready to hand.

Both things and events can be conceptualised without labels. There are many objects in our daily experience for which we do not have individual names. We can think of them readily, but if we try to talk about them to others we have to resort to descriptions: “the library book that Marj lost last week”; “the football boots we bought six months ago, the ones you’ve just grown out of, that you said were so comfortable.”

We can conceptualise events also, for which we have no ready-made labels. Let us suppose that I suddenly remember that it is a relative’s birthday the next day. I may say to my husband, “It’s Sue’s birthday tomorrow! I’ll have to get something off to her today.” When I say “get something off to her,” I am mentally envisaging (conceptualising) the whole process of going to town, buying a present, wrapping it up, and posting it. (If I had already bought the present, and was only envisaging wrapping and posting it, I would have said, “I’ll have to get that book off to her,” or words to that effect.) I have no single verb in my vocabulary to designate the complex train of events involved, but I use the highly generic phrase “get something off to her,” and my husband knows immediately what I mean—I have successfully triggered the same concept in his mind.

What are the characteristics, then, of something we can conceptualise, whether labelled or unlabelled, as unitary? The activities covered by such concepts as taking an examination or sending off presents are highly complex: we should be able to analyse these complex activities and find out wherein their unity consists.

First, there must be some recurrent or continuous feature or features, and these must be significant. The significant features that bind the taking-an-examination concept into a unity are the person concerned, his purpose of passing an exam, the place and time when he sits down and answers the questions, the importance of this examination in the educational system and in the community as a whole.

Now let us compare the unity of the taking-an-examination concept with an attempt to conceptualise something that lacks such unity. For example, if we attempt to form a conceptual unity out of such diverse elements as the North Pole, the oldest man in Birmingham, and the price of stamps, we find that we just cannot do so. Any attempt takes the form of putting an artificial umbrella over them, such as “things I read about in today’s newspaper.” But this is quite unsatisfactory as a unifying factor for two reasons. First, there were so many things in today’s newspaper that the selection of these three is totally arbitrary. Second, their occurrence (and co-occurrence) in a newspaper is completely fortuitous. In other words, the umbrella covers too many things and bears no significant relationship to the elements covered. We cannot conceptualise what is fortuitous and arbitrary as one unitary concept. It seems to be a fundamental characteristic of our thinking processes that we can conceptualise as a unity only what is significantly related.

A further example will illustrate a little more just what we mean by such significant relations. Let us attempt to form a concept of “what I am doing between 10:30 a.m. and 10:35 a.m. on a certain day.” Now, if I am putting on the kettle and making myself a cup of tea, I can certainly conceptualise that under the general umbrella of having my mid-morning cuppa. But let us suppose instead that the moment of 10:30 finds me in the act of hanging out washing on the line. I then come indoors and check on the contents of the vegetable rack and the fridge. The moment of 10:35 finds me putting on my jacket to go shopping. Now, there is no way that I can conceptualise that activity sequence as a unity, like the morning-cuppa sequence. The example is not far-fetched: it could well be an excerpt from the activities of any normal, domestic morning. But the imposing of those particular time boundaries is artificial; they enclose relatively unrelated activities, some of them incomplete. The excerpt is not in itself a unity, but totally arbitrary. And we cannot conceptualise arbitrary relations. Moreover, it seems that unity of person and continuity of time, which this illustration does exemplify, are not sufficient to counteract that arbitrariness, hence are not in themselves adequate criteria for the establishing of concepts.

What more, then, is needed? Earlier in this chapter we said that in studying language we are less concerned with things than with habits, and with habitual ways of viewing the world. We can now see a little of what that implies. In no way do we view the world as a continuous assault of sensory impressions: we view it as already parcelled up into units, and we seem to set the boundaries of those units largely on the basis of entities-engaged-in-purposive-activity, not simply of entities as such. We habitually view the world in purposive, meaningful chunks.

To sum up, then, the following factors are essential to the unity of complex concepts: recurrent features, significant relations between those features, and purposiveness. (In situations where the human element of purposiveness is absent there can still be significance. The boiling point of a liquid, for example, is significant in a way that other points on the temperature scale are not: it is the point at which changes take place which affect its physical characteristics, how it functions, its relations with other substances, and so on.)

There is one other factor vital to conceptualising something as a unit: it must function as a unit, and this not once only but on repeated occasions. For example, the rate of inflation functions as a unit in a variety of arguments and calculations, and can also function as a stimulus to political and social events and attitudes. My present-buying-and-posting sequence can also be conceptualised as a unit because this same chain of events has occurred repeatedly, in that order, and in very similar circumstances. The chain functions as a unit: if I were to buy the present but be prevented from posting it, then a unitary behaviour sequence would have been broken off in the middle.

5.6 Concepts in use

How then, do these complex yet unitary concepts function? How do they operate when we are actually in the process of thinking them? One thing that is certain is that activity is the normal state of concepts. We may imagine that they lie quiescent when in storage, but we cannot enter the storage area to inspect them. As soon as we access a concept we find that it is in a state of activity, part of the flow of living thought; it refuses to hover obligingly for our inspection.

Moreover, concepts never function alone. In a sense this is inevitable because concepts are derived from experience. I cannot, for example, isolate a concept of riding from all my other concepts, because inevitably there must be some person in my concept, and also a horse, a bicycle, or some other means of locomotion. These clustered concepts operate together.

But there is a further sense in which concepts do not and cannot function alone. The very nature of thought is to weave concepts together, hence it is the very nature of concepts to be interactive. A kind of magnetism holds them together in the process of thinking. Like dancers swinging past each other in a Scottish reel, they link up, separate, and link up again, always playing an appropriate part in the total pattern, always moving on as the pattern changes. But never alone. There are no solo dancers in our thought processes.

It therefore makes little sense to ask how a single concept operates. We must rather investigate what are its favoured partners, what kind of patterns it enters into, and what part it plays in them.

Finally, concepts always function in two dimensions simultaneously. They bring associations with them which form a sort of backdrop against which the interweaving of concepts is carried out, and that backdrop is an essential part of communication. Let us suppose that I say to my husband, “Emma has had rather a nasty fall.” The concepts which I am weaving together are those of a person, Emma, and an event, falling, along with some intensification of the event, a very common conceptual pattern. Of course both these concepts contain a vast amount of detail within themselves, but this particular utterance activates only a few of these. A great deal of the meaning of the utterance is derived, not from the concepts as such, but from the backdrop, unspoken but ever present. If the word “Emma” activates for my husband the thought of a toddler, last seen riding a tricycle, then the words “rather a nasty fall” make him think of cut knees, grazes, and sticking plaster, possibly accompanied by sweets administered for comfort. But if “Emma” activates the concept of a teenager on a climbing holiday in the Alps, he immediately envisages something much more serious. I do not have to specify for him exactly what kind of falling I mean: the backdrop provides it for him. (Sometimes metaphors are confusing. The “backdrop” referred to here corresponds in part to the “foreground” of sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.4.1, where the contrast was between conceptual material in storage (the background) and other conceptual material activated for use (the foreground). Here we are considering only that foregrounded material. Some of it is relevant throughout a stretch of communication, and thus forms a backdrop or context for the other activated concepts which carry the message forward.)

Perhaps we may envisage our thinking capacity as a vast three-dimensional spider’s web, with the spider busily strengthening existing threads and spinning new ones as we constantly register sensory impressions and develop fresh trains of thought. The light of consciousness is constantly moving around in the web, illuminating not just one thread or intersection, but a whole area. When we communicate, we focus the light on a particular concept and bring it to the forefront of consciousness. With it come its close associates and its familiar contexts: horse, rider, and bridle-path all come together. Other compatible concepts are brought into the lit-up area also, and we weave them one into another, a mini-pattern of thoughts. Even as we think them the light is moving on, but our pattern remains in the half-lit area for a while before dropping back into storage.

5.7 Concepts and the real world

5.7.1 Concepts and the nature of reference

This chapter began with the problem of how to link words with the world; we posited concepts to bridge the gap. Now that we have studied these concepts in some detail we are in a position to say much more clearly how concepts relate to the world. (This is half our problem; the other half, how words relate to our concepts, must wait until chapter 6.)

Concepts are not signals, as words are. Let us for the moment call them representations, internal representations, of the world around us. All our concepts are formed on the basis of experiences from outside ourselves. No matter what further processing we apply to the impressions we receive, there remains at their heart this factor of externality, their essential otherness. Concepts operate where inner and outer worlds merge, and whenever we interweave those concepts we are thinking with outward reference, thinking referringly. Putting it another way, we cannot have a single thought that is just a thought as such and nothing more. A thought must be about something; it must inherently refer beyond itself. Concepts are distillations of experience; they correlate with something outside the head altogether.

So we must stop thinking of concepts as entities which may or may not be used to refer, as if referring was an optional function activated in appropriate circumstances. If anything constitutes the essence of our conceptualising, it is that when we think, as well as when we speak, we are inevitably referring. Concepts are neither visual nor verbal correlates. Rather, they are referrings, they are our personal organising of the world as we have experienced it.

Although a somewhat cumbersome term, “referrings” applies more aptly to concepts than does “representations,” which we used earlier; the latter is too objective, too third-person a term for something so personal as conceptualising. It seems to imply that concepts march through our minds while we sit back and observe them. But there is always an I in a concept: a concept is a referring because I am referring it. The concept of a bicycle is I-thinking-bicycle. Referring is a cognitive event which a person performs in the act of conceptualising.

We have come, then, to the conclusion that it is people who refer to the world-out-there, not words. And people refer to the world in the very act of thinking, because the interweaving concepts of which thought consists are essentially referential. When we communicate, whether we are speaking very generally or quite specifically, we are referring: the referring does not reside in our having verbalised our thoughts, but in the thoughts themselves.

5.7.2 Some problems revisited

We said at the end of section 5.2 that some of the arguments against considering concepts as bridging units seemed valid only because the concepts as traditionally defined were too wordlike. We are now in a position to answer the other arguments also.

Let us consider the question of the relationship between my concept of a house and an actual house, and my inability to take up an objective position from which to compare them. The answer must take the form that my entire concept of a house is derived from actual houses impinging upon me: I am aware of houses in countless ways, derived from countless experiences, and those ways and experiences are vivid, immediate, self-authenticating, and coherent. What more could a so-called objective view possibly provide? Extra data could not disprove the data I already have, and in absorbing that data I would be referring it as I did so. The desire to take up a so-called objective position is a desire to be less than human, not more.

Another problem raised in section 5.2 concerned the relationship between words and concepts. Does the recognition of concepts as mental entities not force us into the position of saying that words really signal those concepts, rather than the world-out-there? We can now view this problem also in a very different light. Bearing in mind that concepts are not things but events, habitual events, we can see that the dilemma is a false one. Words are certainly signals which trigger concepts, but concepts are not the objects of our thinking processes, they are those processes in action. Words, therefore, do not refer to concept-things but stimulate concept-events. Concepts are not what we think about; they are what we think with.

5.7.3 Different ways of conceptualising

Referring, in its basic form, is just an outwardly directed mind-set. But we can hold something in our minds, and hence also speak about it (referring outward) in a variety of ways. We not only think about what is currently presenting itself to our senses, we remember, compare, imagine possible future happenings, and so on. In other words, we can think (and so refer) rememberingly or envisagingly, as well as assertively.

This capability arises from our faculty of imagination. We can hold things in our minds—that is, think “about” them, think referringly—while holding in suspension, as it were, the question of whether or not our concepts are matching the outside world at that point. This faculty of imagining or envisaging lies at the basis of all rational thought. Because we can envisage what is not present, we can compare, classify, and relate. Because we can envisage a frequently occurring patterning and compare it with actual happenings, we can negate. When we say, “There is no milk in the fridge,” we are envisaging a common and familiar patterning, of milk being in the fridge, while at the same time we assert that this is not so of the real world. In this case, there is a lack of matchingness between our envisaged world and the actual one.

We envisage or imagine things for a variety of other purposes, not just negation. When thinking about one thing, we envisage related things for the purpose of comparison or illustration, as in similes and analogies. We may posit a non-actual situation in order to sort out the causal relationships that would result from it; that is, we can think and speak hypothetically.

We spoke of “the faculty of imagining or envisaging,” and it is probably true that this is one faculty and not two separate ones. Nevertheless, it is useful to distinguish envisaging from imagining, with respect to how they relate to the real world. I may envisage things for which I claim no matchingness with reality while, at the same time, considering them consistent with my real world—they have the potential for matching without inconsistency. This occurs with both hypothesis and negation. If I say, “If Ben comes to the meeting . . . ,” I am envisaging his coming as entirely consistent with my world view, without knowing whether it will eventuate or not. I am hypothesising. If I say, “Ben didn’t come to the meeting,” I am envisaging his possible coming and denying that it eventuated. In both cases his envisaged coming was, as it were, a respectable candidate for “matchingness.”

It seems best to keep the term “imagining” for the sort of thinking that claims no matchingness, not even potential matchingness, with the real world. We can envisage Ben coming to a meeting, but we can only imagine a fairy, or a Martian, or David Copperfield doing so.

There is a fuzzy border between envisaging and imagining. In everyday life we can envisage rather unlikely events, or very unlikely events, or wildly unlikely events, and yet still endow them in our minds with the potential that they might, just possibly, happen. We may wish them or fear them (I might be invited to Buckingham Palace, my entire family might die in an epidemic), but in either case the connection with reality is somewhat tenuous. When we reach the point where no connection with reality is claimed at all, then we are in the area of imagining. Imagining is not particularly common in spoken communication, but is very common in literature.

In the analysis of meaning, therefore, we recognise three ways in which we can think referringly: we can refer matchingly, or envisagingly (claiming potential matchingness), or imaginatively (claiming no matchingness). In any communication, it has to be made clear what kind of reference is taking place, using the appropriate signals. And as always, the thinking involved is prior to the signals used. A clause is not to be considered hypothetical simply because it starts with “if”; it starts with “if” to signal that the speaker is referring envisagingly.

Suggestions for further study

1. The origin and structure of conceptual events (sections 5.4, 5.5)

For an account of the basis of language in the brain, see Blakemore, 1988:37–39, 177–95; Deacon, 1997:145–318. For a detailed study of the cognitive structures that make thought and language possible, see Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987. On concepts as grounded in experience, see Firth, 1964: 19, 20; Johnson, 1987:xii–xix, xxxvi–xxxvii, 5, 101–4; Lakoff, 1987:31, 50–51. On the boundaries of concepts, see Lakoff, 1987:16–17.

2. Concepts and the community (section 5.4.4)

On the relationship between thought and culture with special reference to the work of Vygotsky, see Bruner, 1986:71–81, 103. For an analysis of ideas as cultural units, see Dawkins, 1976:206; Dennett, 1991:201–2. Advanced students should also consider Eco, 1979:22–27. On ideas as shared by a community, see Wierzbicka, 1985a:115–17, 141.

3. Concepts and the nature of reference (section 5.7.1)

The term “reference” is used, broadly speaking, in three ways, depending on the linguistic/philosophical climate of the time, and the questions that linguists were currently asking. When concepts were in eclipse, and linguistic interest was concentrated at or below sentence level, the term “reference” was used of the relation between a word and what it stood for (with no intervening heads). The approach was highly logical, and the question being addressed was how lexical items (such as nouns, pronouns, deictics) could pick out (refer to) specific objects/persons in the real world. Reference was word-to-world. See Bazell et al., eds., 1966:293ff; Givón, 1984:387–97; Johnson-Laird, 1983:230–32, 377–401; Lyons, 1968:404; 1977:174–97.

With the impact of discourse studies, the focus of attention shifted from sentences to texts, and from words and things to speakers and hearers. The question being asked was, how does a speaker enable his hearer to correctly identify who or what he is talking about, either in the real world, or in the mental model of it which they are both constructing? For this approach, reference is essentially speaker’s concept to hearer’s concept. See Brown & Yule, 1983:204–13; Bruner, 1986:63–64; Givón, 1984:398–406, 903–38.

For both the above approaches, reference is essentially a matter of specific identification. But once cognition was established as a factor, the issue became multi-disciplinary, and the question being asked was how concepts in a human head could relate to a world-out-there at all. For this approach, the referentialness of words is dependent on the deeper referentiality of concepts, which in turn is seen as a cognitive relationship of “aboutness” at the mind-world interface. See Bruner, 1986:101. Serious students should consult Gregory, ed., 1987:383–86 (article on Intentionality) and Searle, 1983:1–13, 197–98. For a neuroscientist’s view see Deacon (1997; 63–83, 99, 300ff.), who develops the “aboutness” factor as a complex, hierarchical, and symbolic cognitive activity.

4. Concepts and memory

The view that memories are housed in individuated cells, although still posited as a working hypothesis (Gernsbacher 1990:1–2) is nevertheless now recognised as over-simplistic. An anonymous geneticist discusses this view (as applied to visual recognition) and says that “at the top (sc. of a hierarchy of nerve cells) there would be cells that responded to very specific images, such as grandmothers. Though there is some truth in this, the idea of a grandmother cell is out of date. Memories are seen as patterns of activity, rather than things stored in cells. There is no single cell without which you would not recognise your grandmother.” (The Economist, February 25th, 1995.) See also Rose 1992:224ff, 274–89, 312–23. Research on memory is vast. Readable introductions are found in Blakemore, 1988:43–62; Gernsbacher, 1990; Sacks, 1986 (several articles). For experimental research on memory described for the layman, see Rose, 1992. Read also the articles on memory in Gregory, ed., 1987.

6

THINGS, THOUGHTS, AND WORDS:

MOSTLY WORDS

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6.6 Looking beyond words

6.1 The springs of speech

We have at last reached the point where we can investigate the way in which our stream of speech relates to our thoughts and to the world around us. What we conclude will have nothing of the simplistic each-word-signals-a-concept approach, but it will have wide-ranging implications for linguistics in general and for the study of meaning in particular.

6.1.1 Words grounded in experience

Speech has surrounded each of us from our earliest years; few experiences have come to us unaccompanied by the spoken word. We have already made considerable mention of the sensory experiences that furnish our conceptual memory bank. It is now time to give a little more attention to those crucial sensory perceptions.

6.1.1.1 The nature of our experiences

Perhaps because of the prevalence of image-type analogies for concepts, or perhaps because our visual experiences are a sort of community property, we often tend to speak of our sensory experiences as almost entirely visual, but of course this is never the case. We have five physical senses, of which sight, touch, and hearing are operating virtually continuously during our waking hours. Thus at any given moment the world is impinging on us, not just by one channel, but by at least three: we see, feel, and hear simultaneously. So the filament of which our conceptual web is being spun is not single, but at least threefold. Now, we know that in terms of our now-automatic processing of the data of sight, sound, and touch, different areas of the brain are involved. The skills of interpreting visual and auditory stimuli once had to be learned, but have now sunk so far into our conceptual background that they carry on entirely successfully without our giving them any thought or attention. The three strands of our sensory experience enter our consciousness through three separate and deeply backgrounded gateways, but then they merge. For it is certain that, for any given remembered experience, all three kinds of data are stored as a unit, inextricably interwoven. And of course in many instances we have the senses of taste and smell to include also. The smell of a peat fire recalls days in the Highlands: peat smell and lochs and lilting Gaelic voices belong together. I do not have to search in separate memory banks to combine them into a composite memory—they are stored together, closely intermeshed. The “frames,” or areas in which our knowledge is stored, are rich with input from all our senses, stored together in the way that we experienced them. And accompanying all our memories is the sound of voices. A component of almost every remembered activity is speech.

6.1.1.2 How words intertwine with experiences

So speech (words, exclamations, queries, comments) has accompanied all our experiences from the start. Interwoven with the strands of the conceptual web is the accompanying verbal commentary, provided first by others, and later by ourselves also. And because of that verbal commentary we have always, from the dawning of our consciousness, associated certain sounds and words and utterances with particular experiences. It is not so much that we associate words with concepts, though it is possible to look at it that way. But it would be truer to say that words and experiences together form a composite concept. We don’t associate words with things as we would two separate entities linked together. Our conceptualising is more like a complicated double helix, with language (our own language) as one of the spirals. It is not enough to say that we associate the word “house” with houses, and the word “cat” with cats: rather, we can scarcely think of them separately. All that is associated with houses goes indissolubly with “house” and all that is associated with cats attaches firmly to “cat.”

Now, this may sound as if we are back at our one-word-one-concept position. But this is far from being the case. Just how far will be seen as we continue.

As we saw in section 5.4.1, the concepts with which words are interwoven are full of remembered detail provided by past experience. But when we hear a word spoken, it is not the whole of that conceptual detail which is activated. Depending on the context (an important proviso, as we shall see in section 6.3.1), the word may trigger a very specific instance, replete with detail, or something much more general. If my next-door neighbour asks me to look after her dog for a week, a specific dog of a certain breed, size, and disposition will be brought to my mind. But if she says, “My mother lives alone now; I do wish she would get a dog,” then details are not relevant: I think in a much more general way about the same kind of creature. Note that even in this instance I do not think of the genus canis and its differential criteria; rather I think of dogs in general, but focusing on their known characteristics as part companion, part guard. The particular physical breed does not matter, the specific function does—but still without singling out one individual animal as in the first example.

Although the use of a word triggers only a part of the conceptual wealth associated with it, all the “unused” area of the concept remains on very close stand-by, for that particular word is associated with it all. This has at least two important effects. First, any part of the total concept is readily available for activation; our thoughts flow with ease from conceptual core to conceptual margin, from one specific instance to another. Second, the stand-by elements of the concept, even if never activated, contribute something to our conceptual state. As poets and advertisers are alike aware, what a word makes available can be as significant as what comes into conscious use.

As words trigger concepts, so, when we speak, concepts trigger words. We conceptualise what we intend to say, and the appropriate words arise, virtually unbidden, to our lips. Not quite unbidden, however: concepts and words are intertwined, but it is not an exclusive embrace. Each experiential concept has not one, but many, words associated with it. Whatever we want to say, we have a choice of expressions available to us, all associated with the concept by frequent previous use: we select from a range of options. I can say about a young relative, “She reminds me so much of her mother,” or “She looks very like her mother” or “She bears a striking resemblance to her mother.” All these expressions are associated with the same concept, all are available for use. Our young cyclist of chapter 2 was exercising this same capacity when he commented on his punctured tyres: various expressions deeply rooted in one conceptual source were available to him.

6.1.2 Words grounded in community experience

So far we have selected very common concepts as our examples, concepts like dog and cat and house. It is easy to see how these concepts are built up out of daily experience and how words come to be associated with them. But other concepts arise not from our personal experiences but from the experiences of the speech community as a whole, or from influential groups within it. Any language is community based; its words are shared, not private. So community experiences are verbalised just as personal experiences are. And, indeed, the community imposes its own interpretations and values on what we think of as our individual experience.

We think and talk about many things which are not immediate objects of sensory experience. We can think of much “bigger” things such as epidemics, continents, and recessions, or of much “smaller” things such as atoms, molecules, and cells. (Size, of course, is not the crucial factor, but it makes a convenient label.) Both kinds of concept are derived from community experience in different ways; the words associated with them likewise differ in how they relate to the underlying experience.

First, we must notice that the further we go in either direction from the norm of our daily living, the more specialised is the vocabulary we have to use to talk about it. Our language is built up around the elements on which our attention is most commonly focused.

Second, the way vocabulary relates to experience differs according to the direction in which we move away from the norm. If we move in the “smaller” direction and speak of things below the threshold of our normal experience, then we have to relate words to these things by definition rather than by association (section 5.4). Strictly this applies not only to unusually small objects, but to any concept which is derived in a similar way, by stripping away experiential detail and reducing the concept by a reasoning process to its essential characteristics. Thus black hole and light year are derived concepts in the same way as atom and cell. Unless we know the accepted definition of such words and phrases, experience alone will not tell us what they mean—just the reverse of the situation with experiential concepts.

Going in the other direction—to epidemics, continents and recessions—we find a rather different situation. Experiential detail is not stripped away, but instead undergoes a sort of communal interpretation. A recession, after all, means different things, experientially, to different people: one family is conscious only that the value of their house has declined, while the family next door is devastated by unemployment. But both families understand a recession also as something which is happening on a national or international scale, beyond their own experience: economic and political experts familiar to all via the news media have made the word into a household term with much interpretive meaning added to the experienced facts.

In general, the further we move in this direction from our sensory experience, the more interpretation is built into the vocabulary used. To understand terms such as “the dole,” “rate of inflation,” “golden handshake,” and “black market” we need more than our own experience: we need to know the community within which the terms apply and how that community operates. And in that case the interpretation which the community puts on its own functioning will inevitably be involved in varying degrees.

Our examples so far have all been nouns. But there are also event words and descriptive words which need to be learnt by definition (“oxidise,” “exothermic,” “neutralise”) or in a social context (“make redundant,” “taxable income,” “casting vote”).

However, even in these derived areas it is our everyday vocabulary which tends to dominate. The scientific terms “light year” and “black hole” are compounded of quite simple, common words, put to new use. We employ our available lexicon with great flexibility, giving familiar words a variety of functions, but always maintaining an element of overlapping meaning. Thus in the strictly literal sense it is volcanoes which erupt, yet we can also say “A major row has erupted.” The elements of suddenness, seriousness, and unpleasantness are common to both usages, and the change from literal to metaphorical attribution causes no problems. But we should be careful not to assume from this example that the literal usage has some kind of inherent priority: any news service will mention rows much more frequently than volcanoes. I say “her debts have mounted” much more readily than I say “the cyclist has mounted.” To say that a usage is metaphorical is not to imply that it is uncommon: often the metaphorical way of saying something is much the most natural, and hence is in frequent use.

6.1.3 Words grounded in social situations

In the preceding sections we have discussed in detail the way words come to be associated with specific objects, events, and topic areas. But not all words can be used with equal felicity on all occasions. Children speak in one way to their school friends and in a different way to the headmaster. Adults consider a certain manner of speech appropriate to the living room, another to the lecture theatre, another to the pub. It is not simply a matter of appropriate vocabulary, but of style. Such factors as sentence length, dialect, intonation patterns, formality versus informality, choice of figures of speech and illustrations, social acceptability of topic—all these come into it. Generally, we match our style of speech to the occasion very closely without even having to think about it. Our awareness of where we are and whom we are addressing sets the scene for us, and we inwardly “switch” to the appropriate style. We rarely make a mistake, though a child will occasionally use a playground word at home.

The implication of all this is clear. Words, and all that accompany them by way of style, are rooted not only in experiential frames but also in situational ones. How these two interrelate does not concern us here: the important thing to notice is that both kinds of frame, experiential and situational, are in operation simultaneously. Thus, if we are thinking experientially we recognise that the lexical items “grandmother,” “female grandparent,” “grandma,” and “Nana” are all in some sense the same; they all refer, or may refer, to the same person. In terms of what they refer to, they are all rooted in the same frame, the family frame. But that does not mean that every time we refer to, or address, our grandmother, we have to flip through the list of possible lexicalizations and select the most appropriate for our context. Rather, that selection was already made at the beginning, before we spoke, when we assessed our social situation and selected our style. These lexicalizations come from different situational frames and are appropriate to different occasions. We do not have to think which one to use—our social stance or mode opens up only one possibility to us.

Let us consider an example that will get us away from words that simply name objects. Suppose I am addressing a very noisy group and am trying to get them to be quiet. Any of the following forms of wording is possible:

“Silence, please.”

“Would you mind being a little quieter?”

“Reduce the decibels a bit, could you?”

“Shut up all of you!”

As before, we can see immediately that one is not faced with a choice between these, although referentially they mean the same; the decision is already determined by one’s situational and social stance.

6.1.4 Implications for the word-concept correlation

The example we have just used highlights a factor in our study of meaning which we have so far ignored. We have conducted our recent discussion as if it were true that a single word in isolation triggers a single concept in isolation. But this is not how communication works at all. It is simply a useful fiction, an uncluttered scenario with which to work. In fact, words always operate in company with other words, and concepts with other concepts.

In chapter 1, we rejected a one-to-one correlation between words and meanings, though without using at that point the word “concept.” Some of the examples quoted in later chapters (“rate of inflation,” “old age,” “last week”) have made clear that some concepts are signalled by several words acting together. But the example at the end of the last section takes us considerably further than that. If we consider the various ways of asking a noisy group to be quiet, we can see that the stretches of utterance that “mean the same” are not one-word-at-a-time equivalents: the two slang examples do not contain any synonym for “quiet,” and the two more polite examples, which do contain synonyms for “quiet,” are quite different in grammatical pattern. It is not, then, just single words which “have meaning,” and which can be equivalent to each other in referential value; a stretch of speech also, perhaps as long as a clause, may function as a totality in communicating meaning. So we see that individual words, although highly relevant to the study of meaning, are not, as such, units of meaning, as they are of phonology and grammar. The analysis of meaning, therefore, must involve basic units of some quite different kind. (For a more detailed study of units of meaning, see sections 10.2.3, and 16.2.)

6.2 The storage of speech

6.2.1 Words in familiar groups

As noted earlier (section 3.2.1), we store words together in our minds because they belong to one topic area, one frame. Words associated in life are also associated in storage. “Tadpole” brings to mind country ponds, fishing nets, and glass jars on school window sills; “cheque book” brings to mind banks and department stores and bills. Event words also belong in the same frames: “teach” belongs in our school frame along with “desk” and “blackboard”; “inject” belongs in our medical frame with “immunise,” “run a temperature,” and “nurse.”

But we have now observed (section 6.1.4) that it is stretches of words that carry meaning, not simply isolated words. This immediately points us to an important factor about speech storage: we do not store words as isolates, but in company with other words associated together with them through frequent usage.

Children know the meaning of “Good boy,” or “Hold tight,” or “Warm enough?” long before they can isolate the constituent words, and they will reproduce these utterances as units: we may assume that they stored them that way. Similarly, “Reduce the decibels a bit” seems to be stored glued together, as it were. There are many ways in which we might say things, but do not. I must have many times pleaded for a reduction in decibels, but I don’t suppose I have ever said, “Diminish the noise level by a small amount.” That string of words just does not go together in my storage area, although technically it means the same as several strings of words which I do use.

So, not only are words associated with experiential and situational frames, but they are stored there in strings or clusters, in groupings closely associated because of frequent use. It is these groupings which we access as immediately available wholes when we want to communicate a particular meaning.

6.2.2 Words stored in fixed expressions

This becomes even more obvious when we consider metaphors and other figurative expressions. I may say, for example, “Are you sure she won’t spill the beans?” or “Are you sure she won’t let the cat out of the bag?” But I am not talking about beans or cats or what happens to them. Both sentences mean Are you sure she won’t reveal the secret? Both figures are stored together as units—not because cats and beans and bags are regularly associated with secrets, but because together, and in that particular form, they signal one concept, without any relation to their normal usage. Spilt beans and escaped cats do of course share with revealed secrets an element of irretrievability, but this common ground is not what is in our minds as we use the metaphors. We are thinking of the real-life secret which is to be kept, of which those particular strings of words are a strongly associated signal. As soon as a foreigner changes the familiar word string and speaks of cats escaping from sacks, we immediately start thinking of actual cats and not of secrets.

There are many other fixed expressions in English which we use again and again. Take, for example, the phrase “a forlorn hope” as in “I’m afraid that’s rather a forlorn hope.” If our minds operated on a word-by-word basis, we might reason something like this: “How can a hope be forlorn? “Hope” means a positive expectation, and “forlorn” means sad and lonely. How can one have a positive expectation which is sad and lonely? These words can’t both be meant literally, so let us assume that hope is literal and forlorn is figurative. We can then interpret this construction, in the light of the context, as a positive expectation which is unlikely to be fulfilled.” Of course, no one claims that this painstaking process is conscious (though it might be so for a foreigner learning the language). It could, in fact, be virtually instantaneous. Notice, also, that this analysis does make use of context, but only as an explanatory device when literal meaning has failed.

My claim, however, is that such a process does not go on at all, not even instantaneously. The situational context of which speaker and hearer are both aware and the verbal context provided by “I’m afraid . . .” provide a framework for interpretation within which “a forlorn hope” operates as a unit; the words are stored together, reproduced together, recognised together. In English, “a forlorn hope” means a hope unlikely of fulfilment just as surely as if it were one word instead of three: in our minds, it comes and goes as a unit. When we hear it, its meaning is recognised, not deduced.

Many fixed expressions convey a meaning which cannot be deduced from the meanings of the words used in isolation. “Look sharp!” has nothing to do with either looking or sharpness: it is simply an accepted signal when we want someone to act quickly. Similarly, a person who “pulls a fast one” is not necessarily acting quickly, and is certainly not pulling: he is cheating or tricking someone else, probably financially. The words do not carry their normal meanings, but together they bring to mind a familiar situation. Other fixed expressions use words which occur in no other contexts, such as “kith” in “kith and kin”: the phrase operates as a unit.

6.2.3 Words stored in association with meanings

We have been claiming that words are stored in our minds, not as individual units, but in groups. Now we can make a further claim, that at least some of the groups thus stored are united because together they signal one concept. This is by no means to deny that words are associated in groups because of frequent usage. Rather, it is to say that groups of words occur frequently together precisely because together they mean something. It is not simply because of frequent co-occurrence, but because of their unitary conceptual value that certain words are stored together and come so readily to our lips when required.

This is essentially the same as saying that our minds do not primarily store words, but meanings. Words are stored as associated with certain meanings, and not the other way round.

It is easy to see that this is so in practice. Our previous comments on figures of speech support this position: our immediate understanding of phrases such as “putting your foot down” or “pouring oil on troubled waters,” and our total failure to associate them at all with feet or oil, indicates that they are stored and retrieved as meaning units, not simply as words.

Similarly, the fact that we have difficulty in associating the different senses of one word with each other, indicates that those senses are filed away separately on a meaning basis. The vehicle labelled “train” is not associated in our minds with training for a job, or with trains of thought: each sense is quite distinct for us because the meanings are distinct and our minds store meanings.

Perhaps the strongest evidence that our minds process meaning units lies in the way our memories of speech operate. We have great difficulty in remembering exact words, but we do remember meanings. It is hard to remember the exact wording of even a short utterance, but we can remember the meaning of quite a long one.

Let us suppose a situation where the chairman of a meeting makes an announcement: “There have been unforeseen problems in the completion of this project, but these have been overcome, and I am happy to be able to confirm the planned opening date in late October.” If a member of the audience goes back home afterwards and reports this to his wife, he will probably say something like “They’ve hit snags on the new building, but he reckons it’s going to be O.K.—they’re going to meet their deadline all right.” The importance of this illustration is not simply that paraphrase is possible, nor yet that the “same thing” can be said in different styles, though both these are noteworthy in themselves. But the significance here is primarily that the person reporting the original utterance considered that he had remembered what the speaker said. In fact, he hadn’t remembered a single word the speaker said, but he had remembered what the speaker meant, and this is the way our minds operate all the time. We don’t remember exact words; we remember meanings. This seems to imply that both in receiving and in storing messages, it is meanings that count. When we hear someone speaking, our ears hear a stream of speech sounds, but our minds hear the meaning.

Modern linguistics has not, of course, operated on this assumption. Even studies specifically related to meaning tend to give priority to words as meaningful items, to the signals rather than the thing signalled. Yet what the ears hear is not words but a complex stream of sounds. (Anyone who has learnt a foreign language without the aid of books will know that this is so: it may be weeks before a string of sounds can be segmented into its component words.) The assumption that the mental processing of auditory data starts by segmenting the stream of sounds into words underlies a great deal of modern semantics, but is this necessarily so? There are other possibilities. The implication of the examples discussed in this chapter is that the mind segments the auditory data into meaning units, not word units, and understands and stores them in that way.

We are still, of course, operating with a rather intuitive version of what a meaning unit might be, but the term will serve our purpose for the moment. What is important is to realise that words are simply signals, and that over years of constant exposure these signals have become so associated with particular ideas in our minds that as far as conscious processing is concerned, we simply think of something and say it, and the hearer, for his part, is virtually unaware of the signals used, but only of the message conveyed.

6.2.4 An objection answered

There is one possible objection which should perhaps be answered at this point. How can we say, on the one hand, that we retain almost no memory of the exact words used on a particular occasion, yet on the other hand that the auditory input which accompanies many of our experiences is stored with those experiences? This is a genuine dilemma, because both these incompatible situations do seem to be true simultaneously. It is undoubtedly true that we have great difficulty remembering exact words; it is also true that words seem to be very closely related in our minds to the experiences with which they co-occur.

Almost certainly the answer to this difficulty lies too deep for introspection, but some pointers towards an answer are both available and illuminating. These pointers take the form of two necessary distinctions. The first is between our memories of specific incidents and our general memories. Most of us can, for example, remember the school where we spent most of our teenage years: we can remember its location, its layout, our teachers, our fellow pupils, and so on. Yet the actual incidents which we remember, out of hundreds of days spent there, are remarkably few. It seems that only a few outstanding incidents remain permanently available for recall, while all the others coalesce into a much more generalised picture. Now this means that words and utterances connected with those days and those people may not be remembered in connection with specific events and yet may still be connected with schoolday experiences in our minds in a general way. As such they may be available for use, when the appropriate topic area is foregrounded.

The other distinction we need to make is between our conceptual network (constructed out of our experiences and their accompanying speech) and that subconscious and totally backgrounded area of our minds which controls our automatic activities. There are many things which we do without conscious thought, which initially we learnt by slow and painful steps. This applies to activities like walking, swimming, recognising people we know, and also to our ability to understand our native language and to speak. Things learnt slowly in our early years very soon become so internalised as to no longer need conscious thought and application. Thus it seems that many activities and capacities which we once thought about now operate virtually on their own, without our direction. Our control of language is like this.

We can see this illustrated, in the use of language, by our control of specific areas of vocabulary. Words and phrases used all our lives, connected with everyday happenings and events, have been so strongly reinforced that their use has become completely automatic to us. To our dying day, given normal mental health, we will never forget the meanings of “man” and “woman” nor confuse the meanings of “eat” and “drink.” Yet words and phrases that we used only briefly and then stopped using, or used only at rare intervals, have not received that necessary reinforcement. I have great difficulty in remembering computer terminology, for instance, because I have used it only occasionally and never for very long at a time. I am still in the early stages of establishing a computer area in my conceptual network, and its particular speech forms have a rather tenuous hold.

Thus we can see that speech forms can exist, as it were, at different levels in our minds. The fact that we cannot remember the exact words used on a particular occasion does not invalidate this: as we said earlier, the reason we cannot remember exact words is that we were not at the time concentrating on the words at all, but on the meaning. But although we are aware primarily of the meaning being signalled, the use of the signals themselves, as bearing that meaning in that context, is being constantly reinforced in the “signalling” part of our conceptual frames, and presumably, later, in the deep and automatic recesses. We forget the signal because our attention is elsewhere, just as we discard the wrapping on presents. Nevertheless, the signals and the wrappings have their place—and with language that place is initially in areas of our conceptual network, and later, after sufficient reinforcement, in the automatic depths of our minds.

6.3 Speech as signals

We have repeatedly referred to words, or groups of words, as signals of meaning, which in some sense they obviously are. On the other hand, we have rejected the one-word—one-concept approach. We have even rejected the approach that one sense signals one concept. So we are left with the question, how do words signal meaning, if not in the way traditionally understood?

We have already laid what might be called the psychological groundwork of our answer by pointing out, earlier in this chapter, how closely our verbal experiences are interwoven with all our other experiences. It remains to express this more linguistically.

6.3.1 The nature of the speech signal: words in a foregrounded frame

In all communication, speaker and hearer have some context in common. Both are aware of this, and are aware of each other’s awareness of it, as we saw when we studied the monitoring process in chapter 4. Within this shared situation, some common “frame” of experience is established as the topic of the communication. It does not matter how this frame is agreed upon, whether by some introductory words or by something in the situation: the only essential is that both speakers have the same frame foregrounded. It is the combination of this foregrounded frame and the actual words uttered that acts as a composite signal, enabling each speaker in turn to convey his own thoughts to the other: it is word-in-foregrounded-frame that triggers off the right concept in the mind of the hearer, not simply words alone. In a given context, then, a verbal form uniquely signals one meaning, appropriate to and familiar in that context, and it is in that shared context that the meaning is understood. The human memory resembles a bank of remembered situations much more than a dictionary, and context and words combine to spotlight for the hearer the exact element of memory which is being signalled.

From the speaker’s point of view, when he wants to communicate something, a certain conceptual frame is already foregrounded in his mind, and within that frame he finds and selects appropriate words, which were stored there along with the experiences themselves. If the hearer is for some reason unaware of what frame is foregrounded, he may well fail to understand the message. But provided the frame is known, and foregrounded in his own thinking, the words he hears signal one meaning uniquely, since the words that the speaker selected to use are the same as the ones stored away in the hearer’s own mind in association with that already-agreed frame.

Let us now return to an example from section 2.2. There we pointed out that the sentence “They’ve gone flat” is of interest to those taking a word-centred view of meaning, because it is equally applicable to bicycle tyres and to choirs. It is ambiguous. There is nothing in the words themselves to tell us who “they” are, or what kind of flatness is being referred to.

It is true, of course, that words in isolation are highly ambiguous, since each one has to do multiple duty. Hence they may seem very inadequate signals on which to base human communication. But the fact is that we do not find our daily conversations constantly frustrated by ambiguities. The reason is, of course, that we are not presented with “They’ve gone flat” in a null context: we are either by the roadside or in the concert hall, and have been talking either about bicycles or about choirs. The context is provided first, and the words used fit appropriately into it, with one specific meaning. The circumstances of normal communication are such that words are not used in isolation from each other or from contexts.

We must rid ourselves of the idea that thinking is a one-step-at-a-time activity. Our minds are not processing machines for word strings, with a bank of possible contexts arranged in a separate corner for consultation. Rather, we process much incoming data simultaneously, relate it to past experience, assess it, react to it, and envisage possible future developments. Much of this processing is, of course, unconscious, but that does not mean it is unavailable to us as we communicate. We draw on our subconscious resources continuously. Our conscious minds are a mini-world where many things are going on at once: we focus on one thing, but are aware of others, and semiaware of others yet again. And there is always a context. The mind already has content before the word processing starts; the scenery is in place before the actors start to speak.

It seems that virtually any kind of context can, depending on the circumstances, be sufficient to act as part of the speech signal; provided the right frame is foregrounded, it does not seem to matter how this is done. Usually, of course, the appropriate frame is foregrounded at the beginning of a conversation or written message. That frame then remains operative until it is replaced by another, often related to the first and developing from it. Whether the new frame is related or totally new, it will be introduced in such a way as to make the transition clear.

Often the physical surroundings of the speaker and hearer provide the shared frame. If two women are shopping together in a supermarket, then the comment “Crowded today, isn’t it?” is immediately taken to refer to the shop.

Sometimes it is not so much the physical surroundings which provide the necessary frame, as the social context. Our social context raises certain expectations, and it is in the light of these that the participants understand the words uttered. Thus, if there are several teenagers in a room, and one looks up and says to a new arrival, “What’s new?,” everyone present will understand that he is asking if anything interesting has been happening. But if the new arrival bursts into the room and says, “Peter’s been caught driving without a licence,” then the response “What’s new?” is not a request for information, but a sardonic comment, meaning that Peter has been caught driving illegally on previous occasions. Nobody in the room has any problem in interpreting the comment on either occasion.

There are two possible reasons for this. The intonation on the two occasions might have been different, in which case there would have been no real ambiguity at all, for intonation is an integral part of any utterance. But that apart, there remains the crucial factor of expectation, in this case social expectation. A question is a common way of integrating a newcomer, especially a known newcomer, into a social group. It is an accepted initiatory move. But in the second situation the newcomer presented new information to the group immediately on his arrival, and the only socially acceptable “next move” would be a comment on that information. Thus in each case the group would (rightly) interpret the comment as conforming to the norms of conversational exchange. Accepted social patterns form a part of the shared frame of a communication.

We do not, however, communicate only about the here and now. Often we want to talk, regardless of our surroundings, about something in the past or future, or something located elsewhere. In this case, our surroundings become much less important to the communication, and the appropriate frame has to be provided verbally. We mention a known person or event (“I met Jim in town yesterday”; “Were you at Linda’s wedding?”) and the right frame is immediately foregrounded ready for use.

Once a frame is established by any of these methods, it is reinforced as the communication proceeds. The content of the message will be appropriate. Mention of consumer items, prices, and queues will reinforce a shopping frame, while mention of guests, clothes and reception, will reinforce a wedding frame.

When a communication is under way, the whole preceding discourse provides the frame for each new contribution. The utterance “The trial began on March first” could either refer to a person, in a legal context, or to a product, in a context of market research. There would be no confusion: the words would be only part of the signal, and the frame that has been foregrounded by the preceding discourse would be the other part. However, once the communication about March first has been made, it becomes itself part of the context for the following utterances: contexts constantly acquire increasing detail.

6.3.2 How words combine as signals

When the appropriate frame is established, it normally remains operative for some time; within that context, the burden of communication then falls on the words themselves. How, then, do words call up thought-stuff?

6.3.2.1 How many words signal one concept?

In view of the fact that our concepts are infinite in number and our word stock limited, it is hardly surprising that the simple one-word—one-concept approach has proved untenable. The reality is much more complicated.

Of course it is true that some single words do signal one concept. “Teacher,” “apple,” and “elephant” are examples: each calls to mind one generic (though still rich) conceptual unit. Often, however, two or more words are combined to signal, jointly, a single concept. The opposite of the concept youth is signalled by two words, “old age.” The concept of old age is one concept; it just happens that we do not have a single word for it in common use. Once we realise that words are simply signals of meaning, not vessels containing it, it becomes more or less irrelevant whether a thought is signalled by one word or several.

Many such word groupings are in common use, usually in fixed combinations, such as “running water,” “the gas man,” and “by the look of it.” In some of these instances it is possible to see a clear relationship between the words used in the fixed phrase and their isolate usage. If I say “The gas man came today,” I am not signalling, independently, the concepts of gas and man; nevertheless there is an obvious connection between these concepts and my meaning of a person who works for the gas company. The use of “gas” and “man” in the complex signal makes sense.

On the other hand, “running” and “look” are being used in a somewhat extended sense in “running water” and “by the look of it.” Running water involves fairly rapid movement but no legs, and when we say “by the look of it” literal visual activity is not involved. We often, in fact, use words in extended ways; part of the original concept is carried over into the new use of the word, but not all. “Look” often signals an attitude rather than literal looking: “look up to” and “look down on” add to the attitude a further extended meaning relating to superiority and inferiority. And what is signalled is one concept, which could as easily have been expressed by the single words “admire” or “despise.”

Sometimes, as already noted (section 6.2.2), words in combination seem to signal something totally unrelated to the concepts they signal in isolation. “Look here!” has nothing to do with directing the eyes towards the speaker, and “make a killing” has nothing to do with murder. It is not by analysing the words but by experiencing their use in real life that we learn what these expressions mean, viz., that a rather irritated person is about to expostulate, and that someone has made a big profit with very little outlay of effort. These are very complex concepts, but the situations recur frequently enough to have brief verbal labels attached: the concepts are current in the community.

The examples cited so far all involve standardised word groupings, which, whether in literal or figurative usage, trigger one concept. The concepts concerned have been quite generic: running water and old age relate to many situations and many people. But we can also conceptualise specific things, and we obviously do not have separate words available for every chair or book or dog in our experience (see section 5.5.4). Hence in such cases we have to use more words, more flexibly, in order to pinpoint for the hearer exactly what we are referring to. If I am wanting to talk about a particular book, for instance, I can say, “Have you seen the book Joan lent me?” The combination of words, “the book Joan lent me,” is pinpointing a single concept in my mind, one book and no other. I could just as easily have said, “Have you seen the book I borrowed from Joan?” or “the book I was lent by that friend of yours.” All these forms express one and the same concept, that of the particular book I was thinking of. And in using these expressions I am definitely not signalling five, six, or ten concepts, but just one: I mean exactly the same thing each time. Of course, the concept so signalled is full of experiential detail, but then so are most concepts.

Similarly, in a longer communication, the same person may be referred to as “Joel’s school-teacher,” “Mr. Bond,” “he,” or “him,” and it is vital that the hearer understand that only one person—not several different people—is being referred to. The reference in the speaker’s mind is the same, and he uses the resources of the language to make this clear to the hearers without boring repetition.

The idea that a collection of words can signal one concept is difficult to grasp only so long as we persist in thinking of concepts as things attached to words. In that case, we have no option but to combine thoughts as we do words, stringing them together like beads in a necklace. But in this book we are considering concepts as reflexes of experience: whatever functions in the mind as a unity is a concept, regardless of how much detail is included in it and regardless of how many words are needed to express it on a particular occasion.

6.3.2.2 How flexibly do we use words?

The majority of words operate much more flexibly than the fixed expressions cited in the preceding section; they combine readily with a large variety of other words. This flexibility in usage enables us to say things we have never heard said, develop new plans and theories, and describe things like pieces of machinery for which we do not know the technical names.

Even in very commonplace utterances, such as “Jane decided to go in for teaching” or “The person ahead of me bought the last brown loaf,” we are conscious that words substitute for each other relatively freely. Jane might have decided to go in for medicine, or dentistry, or law. The customer ahead of me might have bought a pie instead. We use words, in such instances, rather like interchangeable counters. This characteristic of substitutability is one factor which has encouraged the one-word-one-concept approach, with the added assumption that we process such utterances one word at a time. But how can we reconcile this with our claim earlier in this chapter that words are stored in groups because they are used in groups? Just how independent are our word clusters?

The fact is that words do not associate with each other quite so freely as the foregoing discussion might suggest. This was brought home to me forcibly some years ago when my husband and I were analysing the Kasem language in northern Ghana. We were using standard techniques to analyse the tone system. One technique involved composing an incomplete sentence at the end of which we substituted a variety of items in turn, comparing their tone very carefully with that of the preceding syllable. It proved exceptionally difficult to invent good frame sentences. The most useful ones were the most generic: “I saw a (man, woman, dog)” or “They like (fish, yams, millet porridge).” But even these were not particularly useful when we wanted to determine the tone on less common or concrete words (e.g., “nostril,” “poison,” “yesterday,” or “thought”). We did analyse the tone in the end, but only by using a variety of techniques; we suspect that in the process we also required our long-suffering language helpers to produce some rather unusual utterances.

There are in fact two different factors restricting the free association of words, both of which were operative in the case of our Kasem analysis. The first is the familiar experiential frame in which a word is located, the second, the familiar grammatical contexts in which it is found. Both of these exercise strong constraints on how a word is used.

Regarding the first, the limitation is that we can naturally substitute one word for another only if both are signals of concepts from the same experiential area, which is often rather small. In the shopping example just quoted, the customer might have bought the last apple pie or the last cream sponge: the phrases “apple pie” and “cream sponge” slot into the utterance quite comfortably. We could extend this, and substitute the last anything that a shop might readily run out of, making substitutions such as “leg of lamb” or “copy of the Times” (envisaging different kinds of shops). But at that point we grind to a halt. To substitute “washing machine” or “lawn mower” stretches the imagination too far: shops do not usually run out of such items, nor do people form a queue to buy them. And we have to think very hard indeed to produce a grammatically possible but experientially nonsensical utterance such as “The person ahead of me bought the last fiery temper.” Words fit naturally only in their own familiar settings, precisely because that is where the corresponding concepts belong. And this is true, not just of a selected phrase, but of all the content-bearing words in an utterance. If we remove any such word from the previous example—“person,” “me,” “bought,” “last”—and try to substitute some other word in its place, we will have great difficulty in producing a list of alternatives more than two or three words long. Yet all these words are commonplace ones which we would think of as associating quite freely with a wide variety of other words. And so they do—if there is no determining context. But once even a minimal context is provided, like the single short sentence used here, then the options for variation are strictly limited.

The second factor restricting co-occurrence is the grammatical pattern within which the word is regularly found. Even for substitutions which are experientially acceptable, the existing grammatical structure may not be congenial. If we say, “Jane decided to go in for . . . ,” we have already, by starting our utterance in that way, greatly reduced the number of possible ways of ending it. Various professions provide possible alternative endings, as do hobbies such as swimming or beekeeping, and competitive activities such as a tennis tournament or a beauty contest. But there are limits to the ways we can conclude the sentence. If Jane had decided to become a secretary or a dental receptionist, then a different construction would be needed: “Jane decided to go in for secretarying” is just not something we say. The restriction does not lie in the area of experience, it is entirely grammatical.

Some words occur with only a few select companions: they are inherently restricted in context. If we are talking about manners, for example, we can say that someone has good manners, or charming manners, or bad or atrocious manners. We can say that someone either has them or has learnt them. But there are very few other contexts in which we can use that particular word. Such restricted verbal environments are not uncommon. We talk of an “unmitigated failure” but an “unqualified success”: we do not combine words just as we please, they show strong preferences of their own. Such inherent restriction is a great help to listeners when decoding messages: before an utterance is completed expectations have already been raised about its ending, which therefore, being anticipated, is much more easily processed. Thus “downright” occurs only with negative things like disgrace or shame; “ramshackle” immediately calls buildings to mind, and “thankless” goes with tasks. To hear the adjective brings the whole phrase with it, with consequent saving of effort on the part of the listener.

6.3.2.3 Grammar and meaning

Many people consider grammar and vocabulary as two entirely separate areas of language: you learn the grammatical patterns or rules, plug in words as desired, and the result is an utterance, hopefully a natural utterance in the language. But in fact, grammar and meaning are very closely tied together: to express a certain meaning involves choosing both specific words and the specific grammatical constructions which they favour. This is the natural corollary of recognising that words are stored and used in groups: groups of words don’t just happen, they have to be combined in a grammatical pattern of some sort.

Even the same word, when it is used in different senses, will require different grammatical constructions accompanying it. Take the word “feel,” for instance. When used literally, it can only be followed by a word indicating a physical object: “I felt the knob under my fingers, but couldn’t turn it.” When used to refer to an emotion, it is followed by an adjective: “She felt safe at last.” But there is also an impersonal use as in “It felt good to be on dry land again,” which describes a person’s reaction to a situation. And how about “I feel like a shower”? This is certainly not meant literally; it means that I want to take a shower.

It is clear, then, that when we mean something and select words to convey that meaning, we are inevitably selecting grammatical constructions at the same time. But we can go further than this: a grammatical construction can convey meaning in and of itself. For example, an inverted word order in English signals that the speaker is asking a question. But some constructions carry meanings that are more specific than this. If I am making plans for the weekend and my husband says, “But the Metcalfs are coming on Saturday,” I may well reply, “Oh, so they are!” This initial “so” construction means much more than agreement. It means also Of course I did know that they were coming, but I had completely forgotten. It is a response not simply to a fact, but to a reminder.

Another example can be seen in the use of tense. Different verb tenses do not always signal a difference in the time or duration of an event. A teacher may say to a colleague, “I’ll take Class 7 in here next lesson, and Barbara will take the infants in the hall.” Alternatively, she might say, “I’ll be taking Class 7 in here next lesson, and Barbara will be taking the infants in the hall.” The time and duration of the lessons are the same in either case, but the different constructions carry different meanings nonetheless. The first (with “will take”) means that the speaker is making a new arrangement; the second (with “will be taking”) means that the arrangement had already been made. Meaning permeates grammar as well as the lexicon.

6.3.3 Words call up scenes

We said earlier (section 6.2.2) that words are not stored alone but in familiar groupings. Within a given foregrounded frame, meaning is conveyed by word strings acting as unitary conceptual triggers, and each string means a great deal more than the sum of its parts. Each familiar word string conjures up a mental picture of its own; it triggers a whole experiential event or situation.

Now let us consider some everyday examples. The word “cut,” taken in a general sense, involves something sharp and some kind of slicing or separating movement. But if I say, “It’s time we cut the lawn,” I am not thinking generally of cutting, with a lawn being the thing cut: I am thinking of a mower in a garden, with blades operating at speed, and grass whirling up into the air. If I say, “It’s time I had my hair cut,” I am thinking of scissors, not a mower, and of a neat head rather than a neat lawn. If I say that a baby is cutting its teeth, or if I ask someone to cut a pack of cards, again the details are highly specific to each situation, and all that specific detail is what I mean.

Such examples could readily be multiplied. “Mounting a bicycle” and “mounting a photograph” involve very different movements and objects; “beating eggs” and “beating drums” are activities performed in entirely different ways, in different situations. Even though the reference in all these cases is to physical events which might have been expected to resemble each other fairly closely, each, in fact, generates its own individual mental scene.

The fact that familiar word groupings trigger mental scenes is highly important in our communicating with each other. It saves us from having to give cumbersome explanations, for we can assume that a given word grouping activates a similar mental scene in our hearers. Thus I can say, “When I was beating the eggs for lunch, I broke the whisk,” without having to give any explanation of the whisk: I refer to it as already known, assuming it to be in the mental scene of the person I am addressing.

Or if a member of my family says to me, “I want to go into Oxford tomorrow. Could you possibly lend me some money?” I know that to offer small change for the bus fare will not be acceptable, a larger sum is required. “Going into Oxford” is the verbal label, not for a travel scene, but for a shopping scene, it is a very economical way of referring to quite a complex activity.

6.3.4 Speech signals and variations in personal experience

Each person has his or her own store of specific experiences, some of which are unique, not shared by the community at large. These enrich our concepts, but do not prevent us from using the same word stock as everybody else; they do not in any way impede communication. We have a significant faculty of “making allowances” for such details, both as speakers and as hearers.

Consider an example. When I was in Brazil, I lived for the greater part of a year in a house with walls of baked mud and a roof of thatch. In this way my previous house frame acquired some detailed content which was quite different from that of most British housewives. Yet never, in the twenty-five years that have elapsed since then, have I experienced the faintest difficulty when using the word “house.” This is partly because my mud-walls-and-thatched-roof house is associated with my Brazil frame as well as my house frame, so is relatively backgrounded if Brazil is backgrounded. But it is also because I am aware that all human beings have their own specific experiences that make up their frames, as my experiences do mine. Thus, if I am talking to someone who knows Brazil about an incident that took place there, I will probably say, “I looked up one morning and saw a scorpion in the thatch,” assuming that thatch is part of their frame as it is of mine. But if I am speaking to someone who has never been abroad I will report the same incident by saying, “In Brazil we lived in a house with a thatched roof, and one morning I looked up and saw a scorpion crawling around in it.”

Relating this to what we said about monitoring in chapter 4, we can now see that our awareness of other people with whom we are communicating is even more extensive than we recognised then. Not only do we make allowances for whether they know a certain fact, or have a certain frame in their repertoire, but we also make allowances for differences in personal experience within a commonly shared frame: we are sensitive to how they will interpret what we are saying in the light of their own specific experiences. Thus the individual nature of our experiences in no way imperils our reservoir of shared knowledge.

6.4 Words and meaning in different languages

We are now in a position to answer the question raised in chapter 1: how are we to explain our ability to express the same meaning in different languages? We answered it in that chapter on an intuitive basis; the English “I’m thirsty” and the Kasem “Water-drinking has me” mean the same because they refer to the same experience. We can now understand the conceptual situation which undergirds that intuition. Words do not relate to abstract definitions in our minds, but to experiential concepts; they do not operate singly, but in groups. A group of words with specific vocabulary and grammar does not need to be matched painstakingly with a rather different group in another language, as if matchingness had to be established item by item and construction by construction. Matchingness is established at the level of the concept signalled, and not of the words and word patterns signalling it.

Thirst, of course, is an experience common to all cultures and all people. Since the experience is shared, the reference of the two utterances (the real world situation being talked about) is essentially the same. But while sameness of reference is the most important factor to establish when comparing meanings across languages, it is not the only one. Other factors enter in because cultures vary, experiences and their interpretations also vary.

Earlier in this chapter we quoted “dog” as a very straightforward, everyday word. But even something so readily identifiable as a dog holds a different place in different cultures. In northern Ghana dogs are associated not with leads, walks, and parks, but with fleas, hunting, and being cooked and eaten. (I confess to an initial sense of shock on learning that my new neighbours ate dog meat—but then to some it is equally shocking that I eat pork.) It is important to realise that words which refer to the same object in different languages may be referentially the same but have different associated frames. “Dog” and “kukura” both refer to an animal scientifically designated “canis,” but only “dog” means a pet.

Not only do word associations differ factually from one language to another (leads and parks in English, as against fleas and hunting in Kasem), they differ also emotively. The Englishman’s affection for his dog is almost incomprehensible in many cultures. On the other hand, few English people have experienced serious thirst: what is only an occasional discomfort in England is an ever-present threat in parts of Africa. The sensation of needing liquid to drink may be the same in both cases, but the accompanying emotions and implications are very different.

When comparing language with language, we cannot rely either on our instincts or on our ability to “make allowances” (section 6.3.4), as we do when using our own language: the lifelong associations are just not there. Unless otherwise trained, we associate the foreign word with our own cultural background, often with misleading consequences. We need to do exact and intensive studies in every aspect of meaning in order to counteract our intuitive and false assumption that other languages, although sounding different, are in other respects much like our own.

6.5 A theory note: analogies of mental activity

In the course of our discussions about how our minds relate words to the world, we have employed several different analogies, for we cannot think about our minds at all without using some kind of imagery. The problem is that all analogies fail at some point, hence taking an image as literally true of the mind can lead to a distorted theory. In concluding this chapter, therefore, we need to consider the analogies we have used so far, and to assess at what points they are illuminating and at what points misleading.

6.5.1  The dictionary-and-encyclopaedia analogy

The dictionary element in the dictionary-and-encyclopaedia analogy was discussed in section 2.1.4.2, where it was pointed out that the analogy is misleading, since a dictionary has only a single entry for each word and its definitions are derived from logic rather than life. We will not discuss these issues further here.

The fact that such a dictionary would be quite inadequate to account for communication is compensated for by the other element in the analogy, the encyclopaedia, in which the words from the dictionary are linked with what they signal in the real world—barking and tail-wagging become associated with dogs, and beauty with butterflies. This, of course, is a big step in the right direction (i.e., in the direction of analysing human communications).

But there are two problems of a theoretical nature to which the encyclopaedia analogy gives rise. First, it is frequently assumed that encyclopaedia entries are, like their counterparts in the dictionary, propositional in form. Thus the entries under “rain,” for example, might be “rain is wet,” “rain falls in drops,” “rain soaks into the ground,” etc. This propositional form makes the information easy to access and manipulate by logical procedures—but it involves the major assumptions that what I remember is in the form of information and that the operations which I perform in remembering are computerlike. But surely I do not remember only that this or that is the case, I also remember much more directly. I can think of the feel of rain on my face, the damp discomfort of a leak in my raincoat, the smell of rain on dry ground. These are things I have never propositionalised, probably cannot propositionalise, and they are important. Conceptualising something is much more like re-experiencing something than like talking about it. Our mental encyclopaedia must have direct, not indirect, access to remembered experience.

The second problem connected with the encyclopaedia analogy involves its link with the dictionary. For the purpose of communication it is essential that the analogy provide a path from the dictionary to the encyclopaedia, so that words can be associated mentally with all we know about their referents. This path must not be considered as an optional extra, to be followed only if the dictionary is found wanting. If there is a mental dictionary (word listing) at all, it must be indissolubly and immediately linked with the encyclopaedia (stored experiential concepts). Moreover, encyclopaedic knowledge must be accessed whenever it is foregrounded by context, not simply on a word-by-word basis. A brief heading can give access to large areas of encyclopaedic knowledge before individual words relating to it are processed. Nor is there only one pathway into encyclopaedic memory: sights, sounds, and scents can gain direct access to it without words being involved at all.

But the encyclopaedia analogy is not without value: it mirrors the high degree of organisation that obtains in our knowledge store. It also illustrates the fact that words give access to much more than definitions.

6.5.2 The double helix analogy

The double helix analogy (section 6.1.1.2) is very limited in scope. It illustrates the fact that words are related to experiential concepts directly, repeatedly, and to the point of automaticity. (It thus stands in contrast with the dictionary analogy, in which definitions are interposed between communicated words and the ideas which they signal.) But beyond this one factor of inalienable association, the double helix analogy should not be pressed further. There is a vast amount of verbal processing which it in no way represents.

We should not, on the other hand, minimise the importance of the inalienable association illustrated by this analogy; if words are linked with concepts at an automatic level, then the distinction between semantics and pragmatics becomes an unnecessary one. Words have direct access to experiences, any use of words triggers those experiences in varying degrees, and pragmatics thereby absorbs semantics.

6.5.3 The spider’s web analogy

The spider’s web analogy (section 5.6) is also limited in scope, for it does not deal with words at all, but with how our conceptual store is organised and how it relates to our conscious stream of thought. One of its contributions is to challenge the assumption that concepts are isolated entities (as they seem to be in the dictionary analogy). Both in our stream of consciousness (where the light is playing on the spider’s operations) and in storage (the unlit part of the web) concepts are inherently linked together in complex networks. We cannot access a concept by itself without simultaneously accessing its close associates.

The other helpful element in the web image is that there is a spider busily at work on the web. This highlights two factors in the nature of our thought processes. The first is that concepts are constantly being woven into each other, not simply being observed as they pass by. The second factor is even more fundamental: the spider is spinning his own web. Similarly, as we conceptualise, we are not simply the recipients of a stream of incoming sense data, but are producing our own train of thought. There are no concepts, anywhere, without someone thinking them, and we think them as agents, not as recipients. Even when someone else communicates thoughts to me in a message I am actively involved as I integrate them into my own conceptual web; I am constantly monitoring, assessing, and reacting. (We can, of course, surrender our valuable autonomy. When we sit before a flickering screen or become absorbed in a book, we are in effect subjecting our own thought processes to the control of others: the spider has handed over his web for another spider to spin.)

The spider, though a very inadequate analogic counterpart to the human personality, is at least alive and active. It reminds us that there is a human being at the heart of human thinking. Every concept, as we think it, bears testimony to that fact.

6.5.4 The pathway analogy

Almost inevitably, when trying to illustrate communication, we use the metaphor of travelling, for obviously a message does travel from the communicator to the recipient. Any good analogy should bring out the progression of this journey, from inside one head to inside another head. A diagram that purports to represent communication is lacking if it represents one viewpoint only, whether that of the speaker generating and encoding the message or that of the recipient decoding and understanding it.

Commonly, the dictionary and encyclopaedia (section 6.5.1) form staging posts on that journey—points at which vocabulary is either selected or interpreted and at which knowledge of the world is accessed. Commonly, also, the spider analogy has a counterpart of sorts along the pathway, for at the beginning (or end) of the journey there is a box for generating or receiving the message. This box carries a label such as “problem solver,” “central control,” or “conceptualiser” (according to the theoretical stance of the writer), but its operations and responsibilities tend to be rather scantily defined. The pathway is dominated by the lexicon, and by other boxes representing automatic encoding-decoding systems for grammar and phonology. These are separated from the central control primarily because their operations are automatic, whereas whatever happens in the central control area is conscious.

The unfortunate result of this separation is that the central control appears to be not very central at all; the communicating message sender seems to be locked out of much of his own verbal area. But in fact, matters of lexical selection come readily under conscious control. True, the selection of the word “cat” may be automatic when conceptualising a cat, but many of our double helices of word and concept involve several expressions relating to one concept, and then a conscious choice is made. I choose between saying, “that book I was reading” or “The Hobbit” or “my library book”—and at that point the central controller has come out of his box and is rummaging in the lexicon-box instead. This does not invalidate the pathway analogy, but does suggest that it needs to be modified so that it is less mechanistic. The central controller is more than just the initiator of a quasi-automatic process.

Another problem with the pathway analogy, not unrecognised by those who use it, is that the path is usually represented as one single progression from communicator to recipient. In fact, one path could not possibly carry the communicative load. Parallel processing must be taking place, otherwise even a simple message would take much longer to compose and communicate than it actually does. It is hard to represent this by lines and boxes without producing a highly complex diagram, and in any case our knowledge of the processes involved is incomplete. The best we can do is to bear in mind that our single-path analogy in fact represents a multipath operation, and to allow for this inherent inaccuracy in our discussions.

6.6 Looking beyond words

It has been necessary in this chapter to handle words in a very analytical way. But the more we isolate words from each other and from contexts, the further we find ourselves from language as it really operates in living situations. The process of analysis can blind us to the incredible flexibility of language. Words and grammar enable human beings to write poetry, communicate their heart’s longings to their friends, vilify their enemies, arouse joy and sorrow, pray, praise, exhort, enumerate . . . and, as the advertisements say, much much more.

The purpose of this book is to study how meaning is expressed, not at word level, but in messages. If we may, in a poetical moment, liken words to butterflies, then the object of our study is butterflies, not in the display cabinet, but on the wing. Later chapters must redress this balance.

Suggestions for further study

1. Words and experience (section 6.1)

The grounding of words in experience is viewed from different angles by Lakoff (1987:49–51—basic level v. superordinate categories), Robinson (1991:3–10—a physicalist as against a transcendentalist approach to meaning), and Wierzbicka (1985:passim, see especially 39–40 on definitions, 59–69 on prototypical characteristics, and 177–85 on basic level concepts). For the prototypical viewpoint, see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:115–25; for the bodily basis of mental processes in general, see Johnson, 1987.

Beekman (1966) attempted a structured analysis of different word classes in terms of their experienced characteristics. More recently, under different theoretical constraints, Wierzbicka has done the same for “event” words (1975:491–528) and “thing” words (1988:493–96).

2. Words in storage (section 6.2)

For a general introduction to the topic of word storage, see Aitchison 1994:3–15. See also pp. 17–25 for types of psycholinguistic experiment currently used in investigating word storage, and pp. 82–88, 91 for the storage of words in familiar groups (section 6.2.1). Words as stored in fixed expressions (section 6.2.2) are discussed in Baker, 1992:63–67; Aitchison, 1994:89–90; Larson, 1984:141–46. For a cognitive analysis of “spill the beans,” see Lakoff, 1987:449–51.

3. Speech as signals (section 6.3)

On the simultaneous activation of a larger (context-providing) chunk and a smaller (focused on) mini-chunk, see Chafe, 1980:12, 227–28. For a theory of meaning entirely in terms of contexts, see Firth, 1964:17, 110, also the discussion of Firth by Lyons in Bazell et al., eds., 1966:288–302. See also the article on “Memory and Context” by Baddeley in Gregory, ed., 1987:463–64.

A discussion of the number of words used to signal one concept (section 6.3.2.1) is found in Chafe, 1992:276–79.

In different theories, words are said to call up scenes, scenarios, frames, mental models, scripts, schemata, ICMs. For a survey of the use of some of these terms, see Brown & Yule, 1983:236–56; Greene, 1986:33–43. See also Johnson, 1987:19, 20; Lakoff, 1987:78–79, 285–86; Schank & Abelson, 1977; Searle, 1983:144–48. For similar views with respect to discourses, see Fillmore, 1977:82–83; 1982; 1985; Gernsbacher, 1990:227; Johnson-Laird, 1983:165, 371–77.

4. Meaning and grammar (section 6.3.2.3)

On meaning as expressed in grammatical constructions, see Callow, K., 1974:88–94; Snell-Hornby, 1988:94–95; Wierzbicka, 1980:185–221; 1988:passim. Lakoff proposes a new approach to the theory of grammar and meaning (1987:289–92, 462–585).

5. Analogies of cognitive processes (section 6.5)

The dictionary and encyclopaedia analogy can be seen in action as part of the decoding process in Sperber & Wilson, 1986:87–90, 185–86, 260 n.17, and as part of the encoding process in Levelt, 1989:9. Aitchison (1994) discusses this analogy at several points. For the differences between a real-world dictionary and a mental one, see pp. 10–14, 230; for problems raised by this analogy, see pp. 42–49; for a discussion of the “library metaphor” of human memory, see pp. 32, 33. She discusses a network analogy comparable to that of the spider’s web (minus its spider) on pp. 225–28.

There is widespread agreement that the “path” in the cognitive pathway analogy (section 6.5.4) must be multitrack. See Aitchison, 1994:233–34; Blakemore, 1988:62; Dennett, 1992:238–39; Johnson-Laird, 1983:452.

7

COMMUNICATING MESSAGES PURPOSIVELY

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7.4 The emotions in relation to the three imports

When human beings communicate with each other, they do not voice every passing thought that flickers through their minds. They give verbal expression to their thoughts for some purpose. In chapter 3 we outlined the three main purposes of human communication: to exchange information, to effect change, and to share emotions and attitudes. We are going to use the term “import” (or occasionally, “communicative purpose”) for these three purposive categories of message, to distinguish them from the multitude of more specific purposes of daily life. We are calling the three imports the informational, the volitional, and the expressive import. We have now reached the point where we can study the different kinds of message characteristic of each of these communicative purposes.

7.1 Distinguishing message form from message meaning

The three communicative purposes are ways in which we categorise meanings, not words. Let us compare two utterances, “It is time the performance began” and “It’s time you went home.” Both use the verb “to be” in the indicative with an impersonal “it”; yet we feel instinctively that while the first is information-providing, the second smacks more than a little of a command.

This apparent mismatch between meaning and form is not at all uncommon. If a mother says, “I think it’s a bit too cold for you to go out in that jacket,” she is not conveying information concerning her thoughts on the weather. What she means is, Don’t go out in that jacket! If she says, “Didn’t I tell you just yesterday not to play ball in the kitchen?,” she is not really asking a question. She certainly does not want her son to reply, “Why, yes, Mum; now you mention it, I believe you did say that.” What she means is, Do not play ball in the kitchen! with the added element of I am getting cross because I’ve told you this before and you are disobeying. The utterance is to be analysed, not as a request for information, but as a rebuke.

We may be deceived into thinking that some utterances are not amenable to import analysis simply because their verbal form is abbreviated. For instance, the simple sentence “Friday” might well seem to have no import if we consider only the language form. Yet if it is said in response to a question such as “When did you draw that money out?” it certainly does have import. It means I drew that money out on Friday, and hence it has informational import. Even “Yes” and “No” have communicative purposes: they are shorthand forms, and their purpose varies with the underlying meaning. Thus “Yes” in response to “Did you go out last night?” is purely information-providing. But in response to “Would you like a ticket for the play tonight?” it belongs in the area of affecting future events, getting things done. In response to “Are you sure you were right to go out last night?” it is expressive of an attitude.

Since meanings and verbal forms do not match each other exactly, we cannot automatically correlate any purely verbal feature (e.g., word order or verb mood or tone) with any particular meaning feature. Words and meanings must be considered as independent variables. This is important for two reasons: first, different languages are very different in their surface-to-meaning correlations and we are seeking here to find a meaning structure that is a constant, capable of expression in different surface forms; second, the surface structure of a language (consisting of words in their various forms and arrangements) signals vastly more than could ever be accounted for on a one-to-one surface-to-meaning basis. In fact, the infinite flexibility and the many nuances of language can best be appreciated by studying surface structure in the light of meaning structure. The analysis of meaning, then, requires its own set of categories.

Prominent among these categories is the category of import. As we study import, therefore, we must look beyond the words and grammar that clothe a particular utterance in any particular language. We must constantly distinguish what the speaker meant from how he expressed what he meant. The former is our main concern; the latter provides the clues.

7.2 Criteria for identifying import

The crucial question that has to be answered in determining the import of any message is, Why was the speaker presenting this thought to this hearer? But sometimes this is not so easily answered. If we avoid textbook examples and instead try to analyse a wide variety of normal messages, we find that the speaker’s purpose does not always lie transparently on the surface. What is the import of interpolated comments, of carefully worded hints, of monosyllabic responses? There are certain simple criteria we can use to help us towards an answer if we are in doubt. We will discuss these criteria briefly here, and then go on to consider each of the three communicative purposes in detail in section 7.3.

7.2.1 What aspect of the personality is involved?

The most important clue in determining the import of messages is the aspect of the speaker’s personality being expressed. A human being combines in one person the capacities of knowing, willing, and feeling. If the speaker’s purpose is to provide or acquire information, then it is his knowledge store that is involved. If his purpose is to affect the course of future events, whether by instigating changes or co-operating in them, then this will inevitably involve his will and intentions. If his purpose is to express his attitude to something, then emotions or evaluations will be involved. It is as though each import had its origin in a different operating mode of our personality: we can be in the facts mode, the planning mode, or the expressive mode. Depending on our mode as we communicate, our message will be informational, volitional, or expressive.

7.2.2 What response is expected from the hearer?

When a speaker presents referential content with a specific purpose, he anticipates a response appropriate to that purpose. If he is presenting something as true, he expects the hearer to accept it as such. The latter may respond overtly by continuing the same topic or expressing surprise or in numerous other ways, but each of these responses will be overlaid upon an acceptance of the truth claimed. Even if the hearer disagrees and challenges the truth claimed by the previous speaker, he nevertheless recognises that the speaker was claiming objective truth.

If a speaker is expressing his own opinion or attitude, he expects a reciprocal expression of attitude from the hearer. Thus if I say expressively, “Mary is a superb pianist” (equivalent to “How superbly Mary plays”), I am expecting a response like “Yes, isn’t she? I love listening to her,” or “I quite agree. She is outstanding.” But if I present the “same” utterance informationally (“Mary is nineteen, works in a bank, and is a superb pianist”), I expect replies accepting my assertion (“Really? I didn’t know that”) or continuing the topic (“Is anyone else in her family musical?”). In this case, I am not expecting an expression of a personal attitude to Mary’s playing. Communicative purposes and communicative responses tend to match up.

7.2.3 How can the message be restated?

If we report a message to someone else, or for some other reason restate it in different words, we tend to stick firmly to the speaker’s purpose in making the original utterance. Let us suppose that I say to my hostess at a dinner party, “I’d love to have your recipe for this dessert.” Taken at face value, this is not at all straightforward: it could be a statement about my inner feelings, an expression of appreciation of the dessert, or a polite request for the recipe. But now let us suppose that the hostess failed to hear me. My husband might then lean forward and say, “Kathleen said, ‘Please could you give her the recipe for this dessert.’” This makes it clear that he considered my original message to be essentially of the getting-something-done kind.

We will later be considering in more detail the analysis of this kind of utterance. Here we simply make the point that an accurate restatement or paraphrase can be a useful clue to discovering the intended purpose of the original speaker.

7.2.4 What is the social setting?

Whenever we speak to someone, we stand in some kind of social relationship to that person, and the form that our message takes will be in some way constrained by that situation. The hearer, equally aware of the situation, will interpret the message accordingly. If I say to my small son, “What a mess this room is in,” he will interpret it, quite rightly, as a command to tidy it up. But if I say the same thing on entering his room with my friend, she will interpret it, again quite rightly, as an expression of my attitude to the state of the room and as an indirect apology to her. Social situations and communicative purposes correlate closely with each other.

7.3 The three imports

7.3.1 Informationals

Utterances that convey information are normally expressed in any language as regular statements. They have been studied more than any other kind of utterance, so they provide a good starting point. The area of experience involved is that of facts, knowledge, information. Because there is much that each of us desires or needs to know, we are always asking questions (“Does this bus go up Woodstock Road?” “What’s the name of that flower we found by the marsh?”) and receiving answers (“Yes,” “No,” “An asphodel, I think”). Sometimes we provide information for which we have not been asked, simply because we know that the hearer is interested (“We had a letter from Jane this morning”) or needs to know (“The dentist rang to change your appointment”). Certain social institutions such as schools and colleges are specifically set up so that information can be conveyed by those who have knowledge to those who have not, whether or not they wish to acquire it. Certain books and periodicals are in the same information-providing category. So are railway timetables, newspapers, and certain radio programmes. The exchanging of information forms a major part of our lives.

It will be noticed that both information-giving and information-requesting utterances have been included as examples under the general heading of information exchange, or “informationals.” (A more natural term to use would be “informatives,” but this would normally be taken to refer only to the giving of information: we need a more inclusive term.) There has been considerable debate as to whether questions should be handled entirely separately, or with informationals, as here, or even with commands. As will be seen later (section 7.3.2.4 and section 7.3.3.4), questions do have a place in all three imports. But restricting ourselves here to utterances where information exchange is involved, I have no hesitation in considering questions as having the same import as information-providing utterances. They have in common the same area of the personality, (i.e., the knowledge bank) and the same communicative purpose (to transfer certain facts from the head of one person to the head of another). The person who provides information one minute is acquiring it the next without being aware of any change in mental milieu. The big difference between questions and answers is that of initiative taking, which is of great importance in the study of conversational strategies, but not in the study of import.

7.3.1.1 Information-providing utterances

Information-providing utterances are of immense variety. They cover everything from “The 10:53 from Manchester is arriving at platform 2” to a grunted “Yes” in response to “Are the car keys in the ignition?” They also cover long discourses and short notes. What is common to all of them is that the speaker is asserting a matchingness between what he is saying and the world about which he is saying it: he is passing on information which he believes to be true to someone who either wishes or needs to know it.

Thus our study of this particular import will involve two main factors: the state of knowledge of the speaker and the hearer and the truth values of the information conveyed.

The state of knowledge of the speaker and the hearer. Normally, in information-providing utterances, the speaker assumes that he is passing on information which the hearer does not already know; he is filling up a gap in the hearer’s knowledge. Indeed, we get rather embarrassed if we find ourselves passing on information to someone who already knows it. We apologise and say, “I’m sorry, I didn’t realise you’d already heard.” We apologise also if we assume that the hearer knows something of which he is, in fact, unaware. This all belongs in the monitoring area of communication.

If the hearer’s state of knowledge provides few complexities in the study of import, the same cannot be said for the knowledge status of the speaker. As we said, in information-providing utterances the speaker passes on information he believes to be true. By this we meant, primarily, that we are excluding deliberate lying, passing on information known to be false pretending that it is true. But even assuming sincere utterances, human beings are not omniscient and are often in obscure situations. There are times when the speaker is not sure whether the information he is conveying is true or not. He is not telling lies, he is not exaggerating—he simply does not know for certain whether what he affirms is so or not.

In such cases a speaker normally makes his knowledge status clear, for truth and falsehood are too important to be handled lightly. He says, for instance, “I think she probably filed it in the blue cabinet.” Here the basic information-providing utterance is “She filed it in the blue cabinet.” This forms the referential material, which can be verified as true or false. The “I think” and the “probably” indicate that the speaker does not know for certain whether the information is actually true.

This example, incidentally, provides us with a good illustration of the importance of studying the surface structure in the light of the meaning. The sentence “I think she probably filed it in the blue cabinet” consists of two clauses, of which “I think” is the main one. But the speaker is not giving information about his thoughts—he is giving information about someone filing something in a blue cabinet. The “I think” is not referring to the speaker’s thoughts, but is used to signal that the speaker is not wholly certain that what he is saying is true. In complex utterances we always have to ask ourselves if the whole of the utterance is referential. If not, it is the referential part that carries the communicative import. The rest has some other value or significance. (Examples which parallel this in surface structure but have a different communicative significance will be found in section 8.3.)

In English, we indicate speaker uncertainty by the use of words and phrases such as “probably,” “possibly,” “I think,” “I believe,” “in all likelihood,” “it is almost certain.” In fact, we keep a much closer check on our sources of knowledge than most people realise. Absence of any of these uncertainty markers is understood to mean certainty. Of course, certainty can be stated emphatically: “I’m absolutely sure I left the car keys here,” “Unquestionably . . .” “There is no doubt that . . .” But even without any such marker of certainty, it is assumed that the speaker is convinced of the truth of the information he is passing on: “The plum jam is on the second shelf” doesn’t mean maybe; it means that the jam will actually be found on the second shelf. (The speaker may have been wrong, of course; someone may have moved the jam. But at the time of utterance the speaker considers what he is saying to be objectively true.)

All languages have their own ways of indicating how certain or uncertain information is: speakers always indicate, in some way or other, whether they speak with personal knowledge or, if not, how reliable their sources are. The surface-structure forms may be very different from English. Instead of a separate word for “probably,” there may be simply a different way of conjugating the verb, or a different tone pattern. The precise form is language-specific, but the certainty or uncertainty of information-providing utterances is a meaning-universal.

The truth value of the information conveyed. A genuine information-giving utterance passes on information the speaker believes to be true. The information, the referential material being transferred, relates to the shared world of experience, and it is either true or false with respect to that world. In principle, at least, it can be checked on. Thus, if my daughter tells me, “There are three pints of milk in the fridge,” she is telling me what she believes to be true; I can readily find out if she is right.

Some things, of course, are much harder to check on. Most British schoolchildren learn that the battle of Hastings was fought in 1066, but only very senior students ever attempt to prove the truth of the statement. It is normally accepted without question. In principle, however, it can be proved true or false: either that battle was fought in that year, or it was not. The statement is either true, or else it is false, but it can’t be both.

This applies even to statements that very few people could possibly check, such as an abstruse scientific claim or a fact remote in time or place. The information giver is essentially saying that things are so, and they are not otherwise. He is committing himself to the truth of the information he is giving, a truth that is objective and outside himself.

We must distinguish between assertions which are unverifiable in practice and those which are inherently unverifiable. The former cannot possibly be checked, practically speaking, yet they do have a truth value, and so are verifiable in principle. For instance, some unknown people must, several centuries ago, have been the first inhabitants of the cottage in which I sit writing this. They were real people, with names, dates of birth, personalities, and a way of life, but like most of the world’s population, they have left no trace behind. Any statement I make about them, such as “The first inhabitants of this cottage probably burnt peat in the big fireplace,” cannot be checked, and so is naturally marked for uncertainty; nevertheless it is in principle verifiable. Either they burnt peat, or they didn’t. We will never know for certain, but that doesn’t affect the issue. The statement, denuded of the uncertainty factor, is certainly either true or false.

A problem arises, however, with statements that are inherently unverifiable, although we instinctively feel them to be informational. Normally, we do not inform people about something unverifiable: we may suggest, hint, or comment, but we do not claim to inform. There are, however, some unverifiable areas of life about which we regularly make informational utterances. One is the future. We say, “Mary won’t be in this afternoon” or “School will close half an hour early on Friday” or “The through train for London will be an hour late.” In these cases we consider ourselves to be passing on information just as surely as if we had said, “Mary was out this morning,” “School closed early yesterday,” or “The train was late.”

It is not a solution to say that the statement “Mary won’t be in this afternoon” is verifiable in practice, even though it is, for by sunset we will know for certain whether the reference made actually turned out to be true or not. The problem is that the informative status of the utterance does not depend on this contingent truth. If Mary’s plans should change, that does not make my statement untrue. At the time that I said it, the conceptualisation (Mary out-of-the-house future this-afternoon) seemed to me to be an accurate representation of probable events. As far as I knew, it was true; someone wanted to know, so I informed them. That was sufficient to make it a genuine informational utterance. Informationals pass on information that the speaker believes to be true. He may or may not be right—that is irrelevant.

Thus the diagnostic criterion of informational import in an utterance is not its objective truth, but the speaker’s commitment to its objective truth. And this immediately restricts information-giving utterances about the future to certain categories of information, for any human being has only restricted knowledge about the future. In areas of life with which we are familiar we can all envisage the future, and envisage it with something of the certainty with which I envisage the Pacific Ocean. But if I am to inform about it, then the envisaged area must be one of fairly close familiarity, or of considerable predictability. I can inform someone that Mary will be out because I know Mary and her plans and habits. I can inform someone that the last bus to town will leave at 4:20 p.m., because I know that it always does. But I cannot inform someone where the Prime Minister will be this afternoon or who is going to win the current by-election or what the bank interest rate will be next month because these are outside my range of knowledge. I can (if I look it up) inform someone of the exact time the sun will set tomorrow, for that is predictable. But I cannot inform him at what time it will rain (if it does) or when my head will begin to ache (if it does), for those are not predictable matters.

Thus we can see that utterances about the future are rather hazardous ground for the analyst: we will meet them again (see section 7.3.2.3). But if someone makes a statement referring to the future and the area of knowledge involved is within his general competence or specific knowledge, and if he is committed to the truth of the statement as far as his own beliefs are concerned, then we can accept his utterance as information-providing.

Another area in which we make inherently unverifiable assertions is the area of nonmaterial existence, things beyond our five senses, religious beliefs in the widest sense. It might be thought that such assertions really belong to the expressive import, that they express an attitude, but this is not the case. I can say, “God made the world,” with just as much commitment to its truth as I would have in saying, “Susanna made a cake.” The problem arises because my friend can say, “Nobody made the world,” with just as much commitment to the truth of her statement as I had to mine. And we cannot both be right. However, the question of which of us is right is not (from a strictly linguistic point of view) important. The important point is that we have both made assertions that we consider to have truth value, and to the truth of which we are committed. If we were expressing mere attitudes we would not be claiming truth value, but in fact we are doing so, perhaps passionately. And this is the hallmark of informational import: whether rightly or wrongly, the speaker is claiming that there is a matchingness between the content of his utterance and reality. He has made, as it were, a personal investment in its truth.

7.3.1.2 Information-seeking utterances

The counterpart of the information-giving utterance is the information-seeking utterance, that is, the question. It operates in exactly the same referential realm as the informational assertion: the realm of actual men and events, the realm of facts, not of attitudes and plans.

The state of knowledge of the speaker. Someone asking a question is holding certain referential material in his mind, something with which he is familiar. He is aware that there is some element in that situation which he does not know, and which he wishes to know. Questions do not spring up ready-formed out of a vacuum—they relate to a context, a known context. (Occasionally when I have said to a student, “If you didn’t understand, why didn’t you ask?,” I have received the despairing reply, “I didn’t even understand enough to ask anything!”) Questions do not arise out of ignorance, but out of incomplete knowledge.

It should be considered remarkable that we can ask questions at all, that we can conceptualise what we don’t know and then express that unknown thing in words. That we can do so is due to two capacities of our minds: the first is that we see all of experience as coherently related, as patterned; the second is that we envisage what is not present, and has never been present, as if it were real, postulating something not experienced. Thus if I ask, “When is the deadline on that report?,” I am working with a known context of a particular report and the general knowledge that reports are often required by a specific date. But the pattern has a hole in it. In this particular case I do not know the required date. I can envisage it without knowing it, however, and I can verbalise it (“When . . . ?”).

Thus I pinpoint the exact area in which my knowledge is incomplete in the hopes of receiving the exact information needed. Typically, different areas are pinpointed—different holes in the pattern, as it were. Sometimes we are ignorant of content: the hole in the pattern involves an essential person or event (“Who moved my glasses?” or “What did you do with my book?”). Sometimes the content is given, but we are ignorant of the relation of that content to our time frame (“When did she come?”). At times we are perplexed because the given content does not cohere well with other facts already in our knowledge bank, so we try to make sense of it (“Why did she not stay?” or “How did you manage that?”). Thus we get “question words” such as “who,” “how,” and “why” which all indicate elements needed to keep our mental equilibrium, elements which when lacking cause us mental discomfort. All questions trace back ultimately to the coherence of things and to our great interest in knowing things.

Sometimes we simply want to know if an envisaged situation is true or not: “Did he do his violin practice?” “Will there be a meeting tonight?” The question in such cases pinpoints the area of ignorance with the unspoken “true or false?”

The way the speaker relates the referential material to the hearer. People direct enquiries only toward those who are likely to know the answer. As far as the referential material is concerned, they go through the normal monitoring processes and present the material to the hearer as being already known to him. What the hearer does not know, however, is the state of the questioner’s knowledge bank. The questioner therefore has to pinpoint his own area of ignorance, in order that the person addressed may correctly identify the lack and give an appropriate and adequate reply. Thus if I ask, “When is the deadline on that report?,” I am assuming that my colleague knows about the report, the deadline, and the date of the deadline. What my colleague does not know is that I do not know the date, and it is this that I pinpoint by using the question-word “when.”

In asking the question, therefore, I am simultaneously pinpointing my area of ignorance, expressing that ignorance to a colleague who can remedy the situation, and putting upon her the responsibility of doing so. For we are not talking here about two computers exchanging information, but about two social beings. If one computer signals a request for certain information and the other sends back some totally irrelevant material, it is recognised as some kind of electronic failure or mismatch. But if I ask another person a question and am ignored or answered with something totally irrelevant, this is discourteous.

Of course, monitoring breakdowns occur. If I ask my colleague about the deadline for the report, it is possible that I will receive a startled look, followed by, “Heavens! I didn’t even realise there was a deadline!” In this case, what I had presented as known information (“the deadline”) was new to my colleague, and sufficiently significant that my intended question was received by the hearer as information, albeit unintended information.

Sometimes a question can misfire situationally. This differs from a monitoring misfire. A situational misfire is directing a question to someone who could not be expected to know. Thus if I ask Sharon, “Where’s Kevin?,” and get the reply “How should I know?,” I thereby conclude that she has broken off her relationship with Kevin. It is apparent that she resents my assumption that Kevin’s present whereabouts have a place in her knowledge bank.

We can also direct our questions wrongly at a role level. If I approach a lady in a shop and ask the way to the glove counter, she may reply, “I’ve no idea, I don’t come here often myself.” Then I apologise and say, “Oh, I’m so sorry. I thought you were an assistant.” I am not apologising for asking a question she couldn’t answer. I am apologising for asking at all.

7.3.1.3 How queries and responses are expressed

Abbreviated forms of questions and answers. Because there is so much information held in common by two people who are engaged in information interchange, the surface-structure forms can become very abbreviated. Very often a reply consists simply of “Yes” or “No” or the one word or phrase that supplies the desired missing element. Thus if I ask about the deadline on the report, and my colleague knows the answer, the reply is much more likely to be simply “Wednesday” than “It is due in on Wednesday” or “The deadline is Wednesday.”

Sometimes, of course, it is the question that is abbreviated, if a previous information-providing statement has provided the necessary context. These may build up into a sequence, for example: “Pete and Polly are coming with the children.” “When?” “Friday.” “How long for?” “A week, I think.” In this sequence, which is perfectly comprehensible and normal, the initial “Pete and Polly are coming . . .” provides the context for the entire exchange. Thus “Friday” really means Pete and Polly are coming on Friday, and the question “How long for?” really means Pete and Polly are coming for how long?

The theoretical implications of this are considerable. However truncated such questions and answers may seem at the grammatical level, they are full utterances with communicative import at the level of meaning. We will find it to be one of our tasks, as we study meaning, to flesh out such abbreviated utterances and state explicitly what the speaker actually meant. But in actual speech, if we spoke our meanings in full, conversations would be unbearably tedious. (“When are Pete and Polly coming?” “Pete and Polly are coming on Friday.” “How long do Pete and Polly plan to stay?” “Pete and Polly . . .”) What is omitted is omitted consistently and according to regular patterns; since it is foregrounded for both participants in the conversation, explicit mention would be oversignalling. But at the level of meaning it is present. It is important to bear in mind that other languages have omission patterns very different from those of English. Given the same underlying meaning, the surface forms in another language may be fuller or more abbreviated; overt signals of assumed information may be many or few. But, as in English, the patterns will be regular.

Informationals and the situational context. A person may ask a question in more or less any social situation in which he is free to take the initiative, momentarily taking the direction of the conversation upon himself. Often, of course, we use politeness formulae so as to mitigate any discourtesy that a direct question might convey. “Does anyone know where my pen has gone?” is much less abrasive than “Where is my pen?” which might be taken to imply that the hearer was responsible for its disappearance. Other such courtesies are “I’d love to know,” “I wonder if,” “Could you tell me,” and the very tentative, “I do hope you don’t mind my asking, but . . .” As we saw earlier, these should not be interpreted referentially: their meaning lies in their situational significance. If I say to someone, “I do hope you don’t mind my asking . . . ,” and they say, “Yes, I do mind,” I feel very rebuffed. I hadn’t meant I hoped, I had assumed. I was being as polite as possible and had received a far from polite reply.

Although information-giving utterances are typically encoded as statements, and information-seeking utterances as questions, social factors can cause skewing between grammar and meaning. Consider the following exchange:

“I wonder where that black file of mine has got to.”

“Isn’t it in the bottom drawer?”

Here information-seeking is coded as a statement, and the informative response as a question—in both cases as part of common English conversational strategy. The questioner does not want to be in any way confrontational: he himself ought to know where his own file is, and he does not want to bring any implied pressure on his hearer. The hearer responds with the desired information, but expresses it as a question. This does not express actual uncertainty, but rather a desire not to give the impression of certainty, as this might be hurtful. “In the bottom drawer of course!” is equally informative but much less acceptable. In both cases it is consideration for the feelings of the hearer which determines the surface-structure form—to an extent which can seem baffling or even ludicrous to foreigners whose ways are more direct.

Situational factors often determine whether a surface-structure question is understood as a request for information or simply as a virtually contentless response. Compare the meanings of “Did you?” in the following two exchanges:

“I bought a new pair of shoes today.” “Did you?”

“Mummy, Simon says I took his pen and broke it.” “Did you?”

In the first exchange, the question is a routine conversation continuer, meaning, “I’m listening. Tell me more.” In the second exchange, the “same” question requests information. It is the situation that is determinative: “dummy” questions (first example) follow information that raises no mental uncertainties; the hearer accepts such information routinely, without challenge. Genuine questions (second example) occur where matchingness with reality is uncertain; the information is reported second-hand, and the speaker has not made his own stance clear concerning its truth value.

7.3.2 Volitionals

When we move from informationals to volitionals, we move from the world of knowledge and facts to the world of actions and will. Any utterance is a volitional if it expresses, in and of itself, the speaker’s purposes and plans for instigating action and changing states of affairs. If the reference is to future actions and events that are possible but not predictable, and if the implementing of those events involves the will and intentions of the speaker, then the utterance has volitional import or purpose: the speaker wants to change things.

Here we are no longer concerned with people’s knowledge store. Volitional utterances are not concerned with the world as it is, but with the world as we would like to see it. We are no longer concerned with what the hearer knows, but with his willingness and ability to perform actions. The basic stuff of volitionals is not what people believe now, but what they intend to do in the future. Thus we can see that volitionals are an expression of another of the fundamental drives making up the framework of man’s life. Just as informational utterances express man’s desire for knowledge, so volitional utterances express his desire to get things done, to plan, and to achieve.

Volitionals are very varied: “Could you move over a bit?” “Prepare these three pages for tomorrow.” “Can I carry your bags for you?” “I’ll get it done by Friday.” These are all volitionals. In each case, the speaker is envisaging some future state or activity and wishes to see that activity performed. In each case, he either has himself the power and will to do it, or he has the position or authority to get someone else to do it. We are not concerned here with the envisaging of unalterable future states; we are concerned solely with future states which the speaker is convinced can be brought about, which he desires to bring about, and which by speaking he endeavours to bring about. His aim is the changing of affairs.

There are, however, different ways of changing affairs, depending largely on who has the power to do so, the speaker himself or the person he is addressing. If the speaker envisages the addressee as the one to bring about the desired effect, then we are in the area of commands, requests, pleas, even hints. If the speaker intends to bring about the desired effect himself, then we are in the area of offers, plans, and promises. We will consider these under the two general headings: directives (when the hearer is to perform the proposed activity) and commissives (when the speaker is to do so).

7.3.2.1 Directives

A directive has two underlying conditions: the envisaged activity or state must be desired by the speaker (else he is speaking deceptively), and it must be within the power of the hearer (else the speaker is engaging in a communicational misfire). Given that both these conditions are fulfilled, it is of the essence of directives that the utterance itself constitute an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to bring about the desired situation. The form which that attempt takes depends primarily on the willingness of the hearer to comply, although other situational factors may also influence the speaker’s strategy.

Uncontested directives. There are two quite different situations in which the speaker has no reason to anticipate resistance on the part of the hearer. In the first, the social situation gives the speaker authority over the hearer, who therefore has no choice but to comply—or at least the speaker confidently anticipates compliance. In the second, the hearer already wants to comply; his will is lined up in the same direction as the speaker’s, and the speaker is aware of this. Although socially very different, these two kinds of situation have in common that the speaker’s task is a straightforward one: he simply has to tell the hearer what to do. No further pressures are required.

The first of these, the authority situation, is a familiar one and needs little elaboration: judges, officers, teachers, parents, all exercise authority in their own spheres. The situation of willing co-operationn, however, may not be so self-evident. It usually arises when the person addressed desires to affect future events in some way, but does not know how to do so. I have an early memory of being lost in a children’s maze on an outing. My mother, who could easily see over the hedges which formed it, worked out a rescue route for me and called out, “Go forward. Turn right. Yes, keep going. Now left . . .” and so on. She had no need to offer persuasions or inducements; my will was as set on my escape as was hers. Other everyday examples abound: telling a stranger the way to the station, explaining how to use a photocopier, teaching someone to drive a car.

Sometimes the problem is not one of ignorance, but of motivation which needs strengthening or objections which need overruling. If I am manifestly going down with flu and my daughter says, “Go straight up to bed! I’ll make the dinner,” I am only too happy to stumble off upstairs. My will is already turned in that direction; only the need to make the dinner has been keeping me at my post.

In all these situations, whether authoritative or co-operative, the imperative is an acceptable form of expression in English. There are, however, degrees of authority. The less formal the authority structure and the closer the participants are in social terms, the more we find directives being mitigated and softened so as to maintain ease in relationships. The scoutmaster’s wife, organising her helpers for the annual scout fete, does not issue commands. She says, “Mrs. Forbes, I wonder if you’d mind helping Mary at the flower stall. And Jenny, you’re just the person I need at the tea urn—would you mind?” English is rich in strategies for telling people what to do without appearing to do so. Whatever language we are studying, and whatever culture we are living in, we need to match directive forms with the situations they are uttered in if we are ever to learn to use them aright.

Contested directives. The speaker faces a very different situation if he knows that the hearer is either uninterested in the proposed activity or reluctant to carry it out. The situation becomes essentially a negotiable one, with the speaker trying to change the hearer’s mind by a variety of devices—extolling the proposed activity, removing obstacles to its performance, persuading the hearer that bad results will not follow but good results will, and so on.

A further variant of the contested directive occurs when there is a choice of routes by which the hearer may achieve the proposed outcome. All holiday brochures, for instance, assume that the reader wants the holiday of a lifetime; the problem is that every other holiday brochure is promising the same. The readers have a choice; the writers of the brochures have a difficult persuasive task on their hands.

The entire focus in contested directives is shifted from the directed activity itself to the reasons for performing it, or other motivating factors. As with uncontested directives, the social situation has a marked effect on the forms used. The speaker may be diplomatic, openly persuasive, or downright devious. In any case he chooses his forms of expression carefully in order to win over the hearer to his viewpoint. Fashions change, of course, even in the wording of directives: the “No Smoking” signs we used to see in public buildings and vehicles gave way some time ago to “The management request customers to refrain from smoking.” Now it is apparently felt even more effective to go a step further and say “Thank you for not smoking.” The different forms disguise the same contested directive.

In some negotiable situations, potentially contested directives are dressed up in a variety of politeness forms. Thus I can say to my husband, “I’ve been very much hoping that you’d find time to visit Albert this weekend.” But I am not talking about my hopes; I am softening a directive, making it indirect. The addressee is aware that he is not being pushed, that this is only a suggestion. Similarly “that you’d find time” is a mitigating comment, referring to our shared knowledge that his timetable is pretty full: it assures him that I am sympathetic to that situation. The actual directive—“visit Albert this weekend”—thus reaches the hearer in a suitably muted form.

Responses to directives. Responses to directives can be subdivided according to the same factors as the directives themselves. Social status determines the degree of authority underpinning the directive, and it may also determine the kind of response that is appropriate. A strict command is a verbal communication to which the response takes the form of the commanded activity. But in most normal situations I am not in a position to command what I want, I may only request it. And where a request is made, discussion rather than action immediately follows—action lies at the end of the chain, some distance off. Such directives are essentially addressed to the will of others; we attempt to bring them round to desiring what we desire, and so to doing it.

So the response to a directive is often a verbal one, taking the form either of willingness or unwillingness (“O.K.,” “Good idea,” or “I’d rather not, if you don’t mind”) or of further discussion (“I wouldn’t mind, if I could just finish this first” or “Why not ask Keith? He could do it much better”). All these responses are themselves volitionals. In each case the addressee is expressing how willing or unwilling he is to comply, or the conditions under which he is prepared to do so. In some situations, it may be appropriate to offer alternative suggestions, as in “Why not ask Keith?” (which is a volitional, not an information-seeking utterance). It is important to note that a directive, just as much as a question, demands a response and that that response will be quite different from those appropriate in an information-exchanging situation.

7.3.2.2 Commissives

Commissive utterances, like directives, are concerned with affecting future events, with changing states of affairs. But now it is the speaker who is envisaged as achieving this: he both wills the proposed activity or situation and is able to bring it about. In uttering the commissive he is expressing his desire to do so. Sometimes, however, he may need the help or co-operation of others in accomplishing his purpose. And this gives rise to different kinds of first-person futures: intentions, offers, invitations.

Intentions. In expressing an intention a person is verbalising his purpose of carrying out some proposed activity without any need for the co-operation of others in doing so. However, this does not mean that such an intention goes uncontested. Intentions can clash, as anyone with a “one-car several-teenagers” household discovers afresh every weekend. But at least the voicing of intentions makes negotiation and ultimate resolution possible. People modify or relinquish their intentions not necessarily because their desires have changed, but because what was previously thought possible is now seen to be impossible: too many people want the car. The mere will for an envisaged event in the future is just wishful thinking if there is no possibility of carrying it out. “I do wish I was old enough to pass my driving test” is simply a wish, but “I’m going to start saving for driving lessons” is a commissive, an expression of intention. (Wishes will be treated in section 7.3.3.1.)

Intentions may be weak or strong. Weak intentions may be overruled by stronger ones: “I’m going to spend the summer touring Europe with Ben. Mind you, if that same job fell vacant that I had last summer, I’d think again, but it’s a slim chance.” Here the speaker expresses a desire, but also along with it the readiness to surrender it if something more strongly desired were possible.

In a strong intention the speaker expresses a resolve to bring something about without changing his mind on the way: he commits himself to doing it. The intended event may involve the speaker only (“I’m going to finish my revision by the end of next week, I absolutely must”) or other people as well (“I can definitely have this ready for you by Tuesday at latest”).

A strong expressed intention to benefit someone else is a promise and a strong expressed intention to act to someone’s detriment is a threat. Both promises and threats can have conditions attached (“I’ll meet you at the airport when you get back, provided I’m not on duty that night” or “If you do that again, I’ll tell the teacher!”). There are weak and strong promises, and weak and strong threats, depending on the firmness of the speaker’s resolve, the formality or informality of the social context, and the likelihood that the conditions will be met.

Promises have been much discussed because, unlike other intentions, the commitment is considered socially binding. There is an obligation involved in promise-keeping which is lacking in other intentions. If the promise is broken the intended beneficiary feels not simply disappointed, but defrauded. A wrong has been done, over and above the loss of a benefit.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that in some cultures a statement of intention is often only that, and there is no social stigma attached to the changing of one’s mind. If a Gaelic friend says to me, “I’ll be round tomorrow evening at about nine,” then she will in fact probably come, but I can’t count on it; there is nothing binding about it at all. All cultures express intentions, but promises are culture-specific. So we leave the analysis of promises to other more specialised studies, along with other culture-specific utterances such as official declarations, benedictions, and formal judgements.

Offers. A person makes an offer when he expresses his desire to carry out an activity, but needs co-operation from others in order to do so. The offer not only mentions the planned activity, but includes also an indication of what kind of co-operation is being requested, usually either permission or necessary information. “Let me carry those bags for you” indicates willingness to perform a certain activity, but also contains a request for permission (“Let me . . .”). Picking up someone else’s bags without their permission is not likely to earn their gratitude.

Sometimes information is needed before the desired activity can be performed. If I pant up to a ticket collector at the station saying “Am I in time for the Glasgow train?,” this is likely to be taken as a volitional rather than an informational question. The answer will probably not be a simple “Yes” or “No,” but rather “Quick! On the left—last six coaches,” or alternatively, “Sorry, lady. Just gone. Next one not until 2:15.” My desire to travel on the train to Glasgow has been clearly understood, and the information I need has been imparted in a way that relates closely to my intended travel.

Sometimes the need for information overrides the statement of purpose, which is left implicit. If I spot an empty chair in a crowded room and say to the nearest person, “Is anyone sitting here?,” I am requesting information, but my intention to sit in the chair myself if it is available is also communicated by my utterance. The fact that there is quite obviously no one sitting in the empty chair does not make the question invalid. The surface form of the utterance is short for, Do you know of any person who has a prior claim to use this chair? It is that underlying question which is understood and answered. I may get the reply, “Yes, I’m terribly sorry, my friend will be coming back in a minute,” or possibly, “No, no one. Do sit down.” In both cases it is the meaning and not the surface form of the question which is responded to.

It might be thought that an enquiry as to whether someone else has claim to a chair should be considered a factual matter, not a commissive one. But the response expected and received makes clear that the communicative purpose was commissive. The person who says that the chair is already spoken for adds, “I’m sorry,” because I had made it clear that I wished to sit there myself. Or, if the reply is that the chair is available, then “Do sit down” is added for the same reason. And if, having been told that the seat is free, I then walk away saying, “Thank you, I just wanted to know,” anyone within earshot would consider my behaviour most odd; by all normal standards, I had committed myself to wanting the chair. This is not to deny that most requests for information are just that: if I had asked the time, there would have been no commissive attached. The example is used in order to make clear that messages must be analysed in their situational context.

Invitations. A person gives an invitation when he proposes a joint activity. This is a type of commissive in that the person expresses a desire to act in a certain way. The attached condition, however, is not simply that the hearer cooperate, as with offers, but that he participate. Thus if I say, “How about a drive in the Cotswolds on Saturday?,” I am expressing not only my desire to go, but also my desire for my hearer to accompany me.

Invitations range from the informal (“Let’s go!”) to the formal (“I suggest that we adjourn until tomorrow”) and from the trivial (“Let’s leave the dirty dishes until later”) to the important (“Why don’t we emigrate and get away from it all?”). As the examples show, invitations can be verbalised in a variety of ways.

A rather interesting case is that of a proposal of marriage. This has traditionally been called an offer, but in the technical sense used here it is an invitation. If Angus is proposing to Sheila, then he wants more than her permission, he is pressing strongly for a joint activity. Of course, if he goes first to ask her father’s permission (as is still done in some quarters), then he is making him an offer, in the technical sense. He is expressing his willingness to take over from the father all legal and social responsibility for Sheila, if the father will give him permission to do so—assuming, of course, that Sheila herself finds the proposed joint activity attractive.

7.3.2.3 A theory note on first-person future utterances

(This section may be omitted if the reader is not interested in theory. Move on to section 7.3.2.4.)

Once, when having a discussion with a fellow linguist, I attempted to illustrate a point by inventing an example that started “I will . . .” He groaned and said, “No, not a first-person future! That will mess everything all up!” I invented a different example instead, but was left wondering why commissives “mess everything up.” Is there some underlying reason that this is the case? And, of course, there is.

From the purely grammatical point of view, the difference between a first-and a third-person subject in a future tense sentence is not very significant. “I’ll clean the car on Saturday” and “She’ll clean the car on Saturday” are very parallel to each other, and “I” and “she” both fit into appropriate little boxes in a chart of personal pronouns. The problem is that as soon as either of these sentences is actually uttered by somebody, a major difference appears. “I will clean the car” is a commitment, a promise. Yet my saying “She will clean the car” does not commit her. In actual usage there is a big difference between making a promise and passing on information, which appears to hinge entirely on the selection of one pronoun rather than another.

Statements expressing intention are anomalous in another respect. Historically, the analysis of statements has been much concerned with the issue of truth conditions. Given a sentence such as “John cleaned the car,” what conditions must obtain in order for that to be a true statement? The answer is rather obvious: someone called John must at some time in the past have cleaned some particular car. But if we talk about someone cleaning a car in the future, what kind of truth conditions attach to such an utterance? We cannot know, at the time of utterance, whether it is true or not: truth and falsity do not apply in the same way any more.

Thus first-person future tense utterances have an uncertain truth value because they are cast in the future, and they have an uncertain import status because they are cast in the first person.

To resolve these issues, we need to move away from purely grammatical signals and consider future utterances in their situational context. But there is still a strong pressure to analyse first-person and third-person examples in the same way, that is, as informatives. Let us suppose that my husband wants to know when an expected visitor will be arriving. If I say, “I’m meeting her off the 6:00 o’clock bus” or “Naomi is meeting her off the 6:00 o’clock bus,” the difference seems communicatively minimal: my husband has received the desired information either way. First-person future utterances seem strangely ambiguous. Are they informational or volitional?

Before attempting an explanation of this, we should clarify some of the theoretical issues involved.

First, we must be clear that the meaning of an utterance is the meaning that the speaker intended it to convey. We analyse meaning in terms of the speaker’s intention, and not the hearer’s interpretation. Now undoubtedly the part the hearer plays in communication is an important one: the speaker allows for it constantly in monitoring. In some disciplines (e.g., translation), the hearer’s decoding and interpreting processes are of immense importance, but they are never determinative of the meaning of an utterance. If meanings resided inherently in words, then any utterance might mean a variety of things, as we saw when we considered the example “They’ve gone flat.” The words of the utterance would map onto a set of possible sentences, each with a different meaning, and the interpretations put on those words by the speaker, the hearer, and the analyst would all be equally valid interpretations of what those words might mean. But that is not the case. We have rejected the view that words mean something in favour of the view that speakers mean something, which they signal by using words. The only valid interpretation to put on an utterance, therefore, is the one the speaker intended: any other interpretation will be a misinterpretation of his signals, a mistake.

The second factor to bear in mind is that the import of an utterance is determined by the nature of the thought-stuff that forms its content. If I say, “Mary will be coming on Saturday,” I am communicating what I know; if I say, “I will be coming on Saturday,” I am communicating what I intend. Any utterance communicating my will and intentions is volitional. The question that now faces us is, Do first-person future utterances always communicate my intention to act in a certain way? We will return to this in a moment.

Third, we must realise that, from a theoretical viewpoint, a great deal is at stake here. There is a strong lobby for considering minds as simply superb computing machines and no more. Each human being, according to this view, has a computer physically located in the head: these computers control everything we do or say. The point at which the analogy breaks down, of course, is the will. We can imagine mental computers handling incoming data successfully; we can even imagine them selecting the appropriate wording for an intended utterance. But it is hard to imagine such a computer actually meaning anything, and still harder to imagine it willing something. Do computers have wills? Are our minds very unusual computers which do have wills, or are they computers of such superb complexity that they give a (false) impression of having wills? Is there really an “I” there at all? Whether “I will do X” is informational or volitional lies on the surface of a very deep pool.

To reach a conclusion as to the status of first person future utterances, we must return to two of our fundamental assumptions. First, one surface-structure form may, depending on the situation, be used to encode a variety of different meanings. Second, the communicative purpose of an utterance is determined by the speaker’s mind-set at the time, that is, whether he is expressing his knowledge store, his attitudes, or his will.

Since the same surface-structure forms can signal different meanings, there would be nothing surprising if first person future forms were used on some occasions to convey facts, on others to express attitudes, and on still others to communicate intentions. This turns out to be the case.

We said earlier (section 7.3.1.1) that we can pass on knowledge about the future if the facts concerned have a place in our knowledge store. Obviously we can have such knowledge about our own future activities, and we can therefore pass it on. If, for instance, I am talking about a wedding in the family, I may say, “The bridesmaids will be in blue, and I’ll be wearing my peach outfit.” I am not expressing—at this point—my will to wear my peach outfit. That has already been decided. I am speaking informatively, passing on a fact about the wedding arrangements.

But it is possible to communicate about the same future event volitionally. A few days before the above conversation, I could have been talking with some other member of the wedding party and have said, “So you’re going to be wearing a green two-piece? Oh, good. Well then, I think I’ll wear my peach outfit. That won’t clash on the photos.” At the point where I made up my mind and expressed it, I was making a volitional utterance, expressing my intention.

It is also possible for first-person future utterances to express an attitude. The student who says “I’m going to fail my exam next week!” is not expressing a determination to fail, nor claiming foreknowledge of the result. He is expressing his fears, the way he feels about that exam at that moment.

In the situational context there are always clues as to which cognitive area is involved—clues from our knowledge of the world, the utterances immediately preceding, the lexical items selected, the constructions chosen. It is only examples in isolation that seem ambiguous and give rise to argument.

7.3.2.4 Question forms with volitional import

Genuine elicitations concerning the will. Questions are frequently used in order to discover someone’s will or intentions. Such a question will aim at one of two possible targets according to the state of the speaker’s present knowledge. If he himself has in mind a proposed activity, he may want to query the will of his hearer concerning that activity. On the other hand, the speaker may not know the intentions of the hearer at all, and may wish to find out.

A speaker wishing to know the will of his hearer may be speaking either commissively (speaker is to perform the action) or directively (hearer is to perform the action). In both cases he knows the content of the envisaged action, but not the willingness of his hearer to co-operate in it, and he is not in a position to insist on the hearer’s co-operation. A directive example is, “Could you post this for me on your way home?” The speaker here indicates what he wants the hearer to do, and enquires if he is willing to do it. In a commissive, the speaker requests permission to do something himself, as in “Would it be all right if I miss the next meeting?,” or “Can I borrow your car this evening?”

If no question of the will is involved, the focus of attention is on the content of the proposed activity, either in its entirety or in part. In the commissive utterance, “What can I do to help?,” the speaker is making an open offer; he does not know what activity the hearer will suggest. Sometimes, however, it is only the detail that is unknown, as in the queried directive, “Am I to chew it or swallow it?”

Rhetorical uses of volitional questions. Questions in the volitional area can be used with very different rhetorical purposes. Sometimes the intention is to soften the harshness of a directive, sometimes to add persuasiveness to a commissive. Such politeness forms are known as mitigations:

Directive: “Aren’t you getting a bit too big for that now?”

Commissive: “Couldn’t I possibly do it instead of you?”

Sometimes the intended rhetorical effect is quite different, often in the area of indignant remonstrance: “Haven’t I told you not to talk to strangers?” “What on earth do you think you are doing?” These are not eliciting questions, but strong directives. Such rhetorical usages vary greatly in their significance from language to language.

7.3.3 Expressives

We now consider utterances involving feelings and attitudes, which we are calling expressives. Without any doubt, this is the area of communicating that has been least studied, for reasons that will soon become apparent.

7.3.3.1 The “I” orientation of expressives

If feelings and attitudes sound, on the face of it, somewhat less important than knowledge and action, then we need to think again. It is in this very area of our emotions and opinions that we relate most closely to our fellow human beings. Any two human beings can exchange information. From the point of view of my knowledge store, it doesn’t matter too much who teaches me the multiplication table or tells me the way to the coach station. It is all very objective. And any two human beings in an appropriate social relationship can operate at the level of the giving and receiving of instructions. If a person gives instructions in the carrying out of his social role, that also can be rather impersonal: the guard who asks to see my ticket, or the solicitor who says, “Sign here, please,” doesn’t come into very close contact with me as a person. And even directives of a personal nature, such as asking one’s friend a favour or asking one’s husband to take over some difficult job, nevertheless maintain some kind of emotional distance between speaker and hearer: the thrust of the utterance involves the thing to be done, not the people concerned.

Expressive utterances are totally different. When I say, “Oh, how beautiful!” or “I do wish they wouldn’t practise at midnight!,” I am not passing on facts about the world or giving instructions to change it in some way: I am expressing the way I feel about it. I am reacting to the way the world presents itself to me, but I am doing more than that, I am sharing my reactions with others. And in sharing my opinions and feelings and attitudes, I am sharing myself. It is when we exchange views, not knowledge, that we get to know each other: it is those who share our views to whom we gravitate for friendship and companionship. If thinking is the characteristic activity of the informational import, and acting is the characteristic activity of the volitional import, then the primary characteristic of the expressive import must be sharing.

Another way of looking at this is in terms of person orientation. Characteristically, information exchange has a third-person feel about it; we are communicating concerning something outside ourselves, something objective. (We can, of course, pass on information about ourselves, such as “I arrived last Wednesday” or “I will be doing law at Oxford,” but in such utterances we are in some sense viewing ourselves as an object of knowledge.) Volitional exchanges have a “you” orientation. And expressives have a characteristic “I” orientation. I express my own opinions and attitudes, and no one else’s. (Obviously, I can report your feelings and opinions, but that is a matter of information exchange—only you can express them.)

There are a variety of different attitudes which I may express to others. I may express my current emotional state (“What if I forget my lines!”), my likes and dislikes (“I can’t stand the way he smirks”), my wishes (“If only they’d come back!”) or my value judgements (“She should never have considered it.”).

Wishes, in particular, need a little further comment: a strong wish to do something oneself is very close to the intention of doing it, provided that it is possible. At the point of possibility, strong wishes merge into volitionals. But often we want the impossible. Sometimes circumstances hinder us (“I wish I could afford a holiday this year”); sometimes someone else’s will is involved (“I wish they’d invite me too!”). These are expressives. Wishes are always expressives until, through changing circumstances, they become intentions.

The referential material of an expressive is the real-world situation that calls it forth, combined with the responsive emotion, evaluation, or opinion. The essential condition of an expressive is that it be genuinely felt. That is, with respect to the referential material, the speaker must really feel what he says he is feeling. He may not be either parroting the feelings of others or pretending to feelings he does not have.

This was first borne in on me on one occasion round the dinner table, at a family get-together for which my son-in-law had provided the roast. During the meal someone looked up and said, “This is delicious pork, John!” My own immediate echoing of the sentiment, “Yes, delicious,” was lost in the general chorus of agreement, and the conversation flowed on. Yet I had an uneasy feeling that, in linguistic terms, I had spoken entirely inappropriately. I had told no lie; there was no question that the pork was all that everybody said it was. But I had never tasted it. I had prepared it, roasted it, carved it, and served it—but I had not yet eaten any. The word “delicious” belongs specifically to the area of taste, and my “Yes, delicious!” really meant This joint tastes delicious, but that is an evaluative utterance, and I was in no position to make it.

On another occasion I was chatting with a friend in Cornwall, and the conversation happened to turn to Prince Charles, who owns considerable property there. To some remark of mine, the friend replied, “Yes, he’s a very likeable fellow, very approachable.” My immediate response was, “Why, you must have met him then, have you?” This turned out to be the case. I had reacted to the fact that he had not said, “They say he’s very likeable,” or “He’s very likeable, I gather.” He had made an unmodified evaluative utterance, which could only mean that it was based on personal experience. One may make the occasional slip about whether one has tasted pork or not, but people do not make mistakes about whether or not they have met a member of the royal family.

These examples illustrate that the signals of expressive utterance are very clear. Even though we are unconscious of them until they are pointed out, we react to them nevertheless.

The examples also illustrate that the testing criterion “Is it actually or potentially true or false?” is not relevant to expressive utterances. The important criterion for expressive utterances is genuineness. If I say, “I’m so thrilled about Jason’s job!,” I am not informing anyone about my delight, I am expressing it. Provided that I really am feeling thrilled, the utterance is a genuine expressive; truth or falsity does not come into it. It is this factor, among others, which makes a variety of surface-structure forms available for expressive use. I could just as easily have said, “Isn’t it marvellous about Jason’s job?” or “How marvellous that Jason’s got a job!” Utterances of a true-or-false nature are much more restricted.

7.3.3.2 Expressives compared with informationals

It is necessary to go into a bit more detail here concerning the referential material of expressives, as they can at times be confused with informationals. As far as meaning structure is concerned, all expressive utterances contain two elements: the real-world situation that acts as stimulus, and the emotion, opinion or attitude towards it expressed by the speaker. But both elements are not always present in the surface structure. The real-world situation may be absent and only the emotion overtly expressed, as in “Hurrah!” Or the situation may be stated in full and the attitude carried only by the intonation, as in “She’s done it! She’s won!” It is in the latter case, when the stimulus is stated overtly, that confusion with informationals occurs—understandably, since the stimulus is itself a fact. But the fact has its part in the utterance only as a launching pad for the expression of feelings and attitudes. The primary purpose of the speaker is not to pass on facts, but to express reactions. (The difficult area where emotions pervade utterances will be discussed further in 7.4.)

The factual stimulus is omitted from the surface form when it is already adequately foregrounded, either by the situation or by recent mention. An informational comment often provides the foregrounded frame for a series of utterances, which may themselves be either informational or expressive, but which assume the factual stimulus without further mention. Thus, “There’s been a fire at the hospital” can be followed either by “Oh, how awful!” (expressive of emotion), or “They should have paid more attention to that report by the safety people” (expressive of evaluation), or “Was anyone hurt?” (information exchange). The original statement about the fire provides the stimulus for all three possible responses and does not have to be repeated.

Where the situation is spelt out in full, expressives still differ from informationals in some crucial ways. In saying, “The policeman who caught him ought to be promoted!,” I am making an evaluation. This is not a true-or-false statement, it is an expression of my personal opinion. Yet the only clue in the surface structure is just the one word “ought.” If I had said, “The policeman who caught him is going to be promoted,” then this would have been a true-or-false utterance, that is, an informational.

Thus we see that certain words are in themselves indicative of expressive import. These include evaluative words such as “ought,” “must,” “should,” “good,” “bad,” “terrible”; experiential words such as “delicious,” “sour,” “soporific”; and attitudinal words such as “thrilling,” “odious,” and “satisfying.” The use of these words alone, without any other clues, is sufficient to indicate the area of opinions, not of facts.

7.3.3.3 Expressives in relation to the hearer

As a speaker frames an expressive utterance, the hearer is relevant to its formulation in two ways, the state of his knowledge, and his anticipated response. The speaker monitors the hearer’s knowledge and either mentions or omits the factual stimulus accordingly. He also monitors the hearer’s attitudes: expressives are presented very differently to sympathetic and to hostile audiences.

As we mentioned earlier, the speaker expresses his opinions not to get the hearer to believe them, but to get him to share them. If the hearer finds agreement impossible, he is expected at least to respond with an expression of his own attitudes on the same issue. The aim is solidarity, companionableness, a meeting of minds. If I say as information, “Tim and Elaine have had twins,” I expect a reply like, “You don’t say! Who told you?” But if I say, “Isn’t it great about Tim and Elaine’s twins?,” I expect an indication that the hearer feels pleasure equal to my own.

If I am expressing an opinion rather than an emotion, the aim is the same: I am expecting a reply that expresses some personal involvement at a comparable level. Thus an evaluation (“I’m glad they chose Tony; he’s just the man for the job”) expects either agreement (as in “He certainly is; they couldn’t have done better”) or disagreement (as in “Are you sure? I doubt if he has enough experience”) or either of these coloured by some additional emotion such as surprise (as in “You must be joking! He won’t hold it down for three months!”).

7.3.3.4 Question forms with expressive import

Genuine elicitations concerning attitudes. People engaged in friendly discussion often attempt to elicit each other’s opinions, rather than their knowledge, by asking a question. Such a question bears a very close resemblance, in its surface structure, to the ordinary information-seeking question; both have in common that the speaker wants to find out something that is in the mind of the hearer and is taking the conversational initiative in order to find out. There are, however, differences between information-exchange questions and expressive questions by which the analyst is alerted to the import involved. One difference is that an expressive question often contains some such phrase as “do you think?” or “in your opinion,” as in “Which do you think looks better, the blue or the pink?” If the question does not contain any such “opinion tag,” it is possible to add one without any change in meaning or naturalness: “Should we introduce ourselves to her (do you think)?” Another difference is that the referential material on which the expressive question is based is often something about which the hearer could not be expected to have certain knowledge. Indeed, knowledge may not be possible. And in an opinion exchange, unlike an information exchange, no offence is taken at this. Thus, if we present an opinion-seeking question like “Well, do you think Arsenal will win their game on Saturday?” we do not expect a reply like “Yes, they will win 2—0, Johnson scoring both goals.” Nor do we expect a repudiation of any knowledge of the situation as in “I haven’t got a crystal ball.” What we are expecting is something like “Anybody’s guess—but I’d say they probably will; United aren’t on form at the moment. What do you think yourself?” The use of “I’d say,” “probably,” and “do you think” signal that actual knowledge is not involved; opinions and assessments are.

Rhetorical uses of expressive questions. Some questions with expressive import are not intended to elicit a response, but are used with rhetorical effect, normally in casual situations.

As with volitional questions (section 7.3.2.4), expressive questions can be used in order to mitigate an otherwise unacceptable comment. “Isn’t it a bit on the expensive side?” is a mitigated way of expressing a possibly unwelcome opinion.

Expressive questions may also be used to express positive evaluations (“Aren’t they a most delightful couple?”) and negative evaluations (“Is he out of his mind?”). A wide variety of emotional states may be expressed in question form, for example, indignation (“Isn’t that the limit?”), surprise (“Who on earth told you that?”) and despair (“What are we to do with you?”). Sometimes a question carries overtones of sarcasm, as in “Now, wasn’t that clever?” The expression of positive emotions by questions is less frequent, and usually occurs in an evaluative context, as in “Isn’t that kind of her?”

As with volitional questions, the rhetorical uses of expressive questions in English are not necessarily paralleled in other languages.

7.3.3.5 Social expressives

Sometimes a conversation may appear to be conducted on a purely factual level, yet the real purpose is not that of exchanging information. A common example is reminiscing. Suppose someone says, “Do you remember the day that Jane fell in the river?” This will probably elicit a series of further recollections: “Yes, and so she couldn’t go to the concert that night.” “And Meg went instead.” “But it was a rotten concert anyway.” For everyone concerned, this entire sequence consists of old information, sometimes well remembered, sometimes long forgotten and now recalled. The purpose of reactivating these old memories is not to communicate facts or to fill in gaps in someone’s knowledge bank: it is to promote a warm social atmosphere by bringing to conscious awareness a shared past.

There are many forms of joking, banter, and humorous exchanges which are similarly expressive in purpose. The exchange of information is subsidiary to the social purpose of laughing together. “Facts” are presented in a highly decorative form; the mere mention of a mother-in-law produces mirth. No one asks, “True or false?” They just laugh together.

Sometimes expressives with the purpose of social solidarity become standardised. If someone says, “Hello! How are you?,” the acceptable answer is “Fine!” regardless of one’s state of health. The real information exchange comes later, after the social requirements have been met. (In this book we are concerned only with communications which genuinely express the thought-content of the speaker, so standardised forms will not be considered further.)

7.4 The emotions in relation to the three imports

Since expressive import communicates feelings and attitudes, it might be thought that all utterances expressing emotion are therefore expressive in import, but although this is often the case, the situation is too complex for such an easy solution. Emotion is a heightening of feeling, a more-than-normal intensity, which can accompany any utterance. Such heightened feeling can be expressed while conveying information (“And when I turned round, my purse was gone!”) or while giving commands (“Don’t dare set foot in this house again!”).

Whatever the import of the utterance, emotion is expressed in very similar ways. Intonation is exaggerated; long grammatical constructions are replaced by short, ejaculatory ones, sparse in connectives. Figures of speech are common in emotional utterances: I don’t know what to do is expressed as “I’m at my wits’ end!” Repetition is also common: “I’ll never, never speak to you again!” Of course, most utterances are accompanied by some degree of emotion, however low-key; to be devoid of emotion at all is an abnormal state. But at “normal” levels of emotion, the import of the utterance is not called into question. What we are talking about here are utterances where strong emotion is being expressed.

Since utterances of any import convey emotion, and do so in very similar ways, how do we know when an utterance is expressive, and when it is an emotionally charged informational or volitional? An example may clarify the issues involved. Recently when I was chatting with some friends, one of them told us that he and his wife were planning to cross the Sahara by Land Rover in six months’ time. Immediately another friend leapt up and said, with great excitement, “Oh, can we come with you?” The referential material here was undoubtedly us accompany you (across the Sahara), and it was uttered in a way expressive of great enthusiasm. Equally, however, there was an intention of affecting future events: it was, technically, an invitation, a proposal of joint activity subject, in this instance, to the permission of the hearer, who had already suggested the proposed activity, but only as a personal intention. An invitation, like any commissive, in any case expresses desire: in this case the strength of the desire gave a strong emotional overlay. No emotion other than the desire itself was involved; hence the utterance was not an expressive one (primarily expressing an emotion) but a commissive one (primarily expressing will, here strongly intensified).

What criteria, then, are we to use in determining the import of an emotional utterance? No new criteria are, in fact, required; the established ones of speaker’s purpose, area of personality involved, and anticipated response of the hearer, will be sufficient to resolve the issue. In the Sahara example, the request to accompany the expedition was undoubtedly intended to affect future events, and it expressed the will of the speaker, which had taken a new and dramatic turn. And the desired response of the hearer was not simply belief or shared emotion, but agreement to a joint activity—which did eventually take place.

If the emotional utterance is apparently informational, one further criterion may be applied. Since informationals normally communicate facts to someone who does not already know them, the state of the hearer’s knowledge is important. If the factual part of the utterance contains known information (“You came in first!”) or readily accessible information (“So that was the end of our beautiful holiday”) then the import is not informational, but expressive.

Suggestions for further study

1. The functions of language

Halliday and Hasan (1985:15–17) give a history of the analysis of the functions of language, quoting among others Bühler , who distinguished three functions very similar to the three imports of this chapter, and Jakobson, who accepted these and added three others. Against this background, there developed the speech act tradition of Austin (1962) and Searle (1979). For the theory of speech acts, see Searle, 1979:viii, 1–29. The theory has been widely discussed, but see Callow & Callow 1992:5–37, esp. 9, 17, 23–27, for a practical example.

2. Discussions of specific imports

For a discussion of questions, see Givón, 1984:781–92 (yes-no questions) and 793–804 (WH questions). For the use of questions in interviews, see Schiffrin, 1994:144–80. For a study of volitionals, see Givón, 1984:806–13. Firth (1964:110–14) makes comments on the expressive use of language, though not within the speech-act framework. Longacre (1983:50) discusses types of dialogue in terms very similar to the imports studied in this chapter.

3. Speech acts and culture

There has been a reaction that Searle’s speech acts are too culture-specific: see especially Wierzbicka, 1985b and 1985c, also George, 1984:16–17 and Fraser, 1984:43–49.

8

COMMUNICATING MESSAGES WITH SEVERAL PURPOSES

8.1 The possibility of multiple import

8.2 Apparent double import

8.3 Genuine double import

8.4 Apparent single import with extended significance

8.5 The purposive chain

8.6 Informationals with a variety of purposes

8.7 Multiple import in longer messages

8.1 The possibility of multiple import

We have established three very broad categories of communicative purpose: the exchange of information, the affecting of future events, and the expression of one’s inward state. The question arises, Is it possible for a single utterance to carry more than one import at the same time, or are the categories mutually exclusive?

The short answer to this is that since import is defined in terms of the speaker’s purpose, it would be exceedingly odd if utterances could carry only one import. People can have many purposes; therefore we presume that utterances can have multiple import. But to say this might seem to open the way to chaos: what is the point of establishing three imports if they are all happening at once most of the time? In fact, most utterances are quite clear in their import, and the chaos we fear does not occur. And where an utterance does carry multiple import, it does so in a structured way that is amenable to analysis. It is not chaotic at all.

Before we go on to consider different kinds of multiple import, we must first pinpoint the confusion of thought underlying the assumption that if each import is the expression of one purpose, then an utterance fulfilling several purposes must have multiple import. This confusion arises because of a failure to distinguish between strictly communicative purposes and other kinds of purpose. Utterances normally carry one of the communicative purposes of informing, instigating, or expressing. But this does not mean that they cannot simultaneously have a variety of other purposes, social, personal, or political. If I say to my husband, “I’m just off to the dentist’s,” I may have a variety of personal purposes: I may want sympathy, or I may want to remind him that he will need to meet our son from school in my absence, or that he needs to make a dentist’s appointment himself. But these are purposes arising from my personality and lifestyle; they are not communicative purposes.

To discover the communicative purpose of an utterance we must ask, With what purpose did the speaker communicate this referential content? In the preceding example, the referential content is self immediate-future going-to-dentist. My communicative purpose is to inform my husband of this. I am not expressing my intention of going, nor am I trying to affect future events; I am informing him of my imminent departure.

In determining whether an utterance is informational, it is necessary to assess whether the hearer already knows the information concerned or not. If it is new to him, the speaker’s purpose is almost certainly to impart information, to fill a gap in the hearer’s knowledge store. But if there is no such gap, if the information is already present, readily accessible in the hearer’s mind, then it is unlikely that the speaker’s intent is to inform; at that point we must look for a further communicative purpose. In the example just quoted there was almost certainly a knowledge gap to be filled: the hearer knew of the planned visit to the dentist but not of the precise time of departure. The communicative purpose, therefore, was informational; any further purposes of a personal or social nature have no direct bearing on the question of multiple import.

After clarification in this way, many doubtful instances are resolved; a single communicative purpose can be identified. But there are still a variety of cases in which it is difficult to give a straightforward account of the purposes involved. These more complex examples do seem to exhibit multiple import, and they are of considerable interest.

8.2 Apparent double import

All first person present tense utterances such as “I wonder if she’ll come in time,” “I do hope you won’t be late,” and “I promise to give it back tonight” are cases in which the speaker appears to be informing the hearer that he is wondering, hoping, or promising, and at the same time expressing opinions or trying to affect events. It is true that there are situations in which the speaker does inform while having a further communicative purpose beyond the sheer giving of information. (We will consider this in sections 8.4 and 8.5.) But the examples just cited are not of that type; they are not informational at all. To see why, we have to ask, What is the referential content of the utterance? In these particular examples the contents may be expressed as She future come in-time, You future not-come late, I future give-it-back tonight. We then have to ask, If the present tense words “wonder,” “hope,” and “promise” do not signal that referential content, then what function do they perform?

The answer is that these words are not being used referentially at all, but with a variety of different significances. “I wonder” introduces an opinion-seeking utterance. The person addressed is not envisaged as knowing whether the lady in question will arrive in time: the utterance is meant to stimulate a discussion, not to elicit information. Hence “I wonder” is a signal of expressive import, not a reference to informational import. Similarly, “I promise” is a signal of the volitional import of what follows: it is not a reference to promising. “I do hope” is a signal that the speaker holds the content you not-late expressively as a wish. (Another interpretation is possible, depending on the context: it could be that the speaker is not hoping anything, but is using “I do hope” as a polite mitigation of the command “See to it that you aren’t late” (see section 8.4).)

It is important, therefore, to remember that words are used not only referentially, but as signals of import as well. We must first sort out just what kind of signal the verbal forms are giving, then isolate the referential material, and then—and only then—ask with what import or imports that referential material is being presented. Once that issue is settled, then any verbal forms which seem surplus to the reference and import should be assessed as to their contribution to the total meaning. In the previous examples, “I wonder” and “I do hope” are not surplus, but are signals of import (or, in the second interpretation of “I do hope,” of mitigation). “I promise” is the only form that seems redundant, since “I’ll give it back tonight” would constitute a promise without the introductory formula. Thus it is either a redundant import signal (of a particular kind of commissive) or a marker of emphasis, or both; in any case, it is not informational, and no dual import is involved.

8.3 Genuine double import

There are utterances which do appear to carry two imports simultaneously, even after we have isolated the referential content. The simultaneous imports could be either informational combined with expressive or expressive combined with volitional. (Though it is theoretically possible for informational import to combine with volitional, this does not occur, as we shall see.)

Utterances with informational import may be combined with expressive if an emotion or evaluation is simultaneously expressed by the speaker. If I ask where a certain friend is and receive the answer “Gone out with that Robert fellow again,” then undoubtedly I have received the information I asked for, but I have also received a very negative evaluation of my friend’s behaviour. This is a case of genuine double import and has a valid theoretical basis inasmuch as we unconsciously evaluate and react to all the facts we know: if we evaluate a fact negatively, then we may well pass on the fact and the negative evaluation simultaneously, and with emotion.

Notice that in the preceding example the same referential material (Friend gone-out-again with-Robert) underlies both the informational and the expressive purpose. It constitutes both the information provided and the situational stimulus to a negative emotion. These can be communicated simultaneously only because the negative emotion can be expressed without further referential content being involved: it is expressed here by intonation and by lexical choices (“that fellow”).

Vocabulary selection is an effective means of communicating the speaker’s emotions and attitudes; instead of an emotionally neutral word it is often possible to choose an attitudinally loaded equivalent. To say that someone is always ranting on about their hobby is a negative way of saying that they talk about it a great deal. To talk about a slap-up meal is an approving (and informal) way of referring to a large one.

Similarly, utterances with volitional import may be expressive as well if a specific emotion is simultaneously communicated by the speaker. For example, if a teacher or parent expresses obvious dissatisfaction with a child’s work, the child may say, “So I suppose you want me to do the whole thing all over again, do you?” This question, which elicits the will of the hearer, is volitional. It constitutes an offer, since the speaker will perform the activity if the hearer wills it. But the wording makes clear that it is a very reluctant offer. The attitude and the offer are simultaneous, sharing one referential content.

We alluded to the theoretical possibility of an utterance that combines informational and volitional imports. Obviously we do sometimes inform with the intention of stimulating action, as when we say, “There’s someone at the door” or “Fire!” But such utterances are not interpreted as having genuine simultaneous imports. A better interpretation will be seen in the following section.

8.4 Apparent single import with extended significance

When my mother used to say, “Does anyone feel a draught from that window?,” it sounded like a genuine information-seeking question, but in fact she meant, “Please shut the window.” And if I call out to the family, “Dinner’s ready!,” I am not simply informing them, I am telling them to come: if five minutes later I find myself still sitting alone in front of rapidly cooling food, I feel indignant.

These examples differ from those mentioned in the preceding section. Their referential content is quite unambiguously information-exchanging, yet the speakers meant something over and above what they literally said; that is, they meant something with different referential content. My mother referred to draughts and to windows, but did not actually refer to shutting, which she meant. When I summon the family to dinner I refer only to the readiness of the meal, but I mean (without referring overtly to) the hearers and their coming. It is not possible, therefore, to analyse these as two simultaneous imports distributed over one referential content: rather, one import (informational) is clearly expressed, and from it the hearers are intended to derive a volitional communication with a different, though related, content. But import is supposed to represent what the speaker actually means when he communicates. So what import do those utterances have?

Two questions arise: (1) Why do we not always say what we mean, transparently and straightforwardly? (2) How do people understand us when we mean something other than what we say? When we have answered these questions we will be halfway to defining the import of these utterances. (The other half will be provided in section 8.5.)

Why do we not always say what we mean? We have already considered a social reason for saying less than we mean: it is very rarely acceptable to give direct commands. Therefore ways are found of conveying the same thing indirectly. (Note that the two preceding examples were directives: it is much more rare for emotions, evaluations, or information to have to be mitigated, though they too do occur.)

Another reason for not saying exactly what we mean is our dislike of wordiness and redundancy, of any kind of oversignalling. We much prefer the deliberately brief understatement that leaves elements unsaid. It is more vivid, less boring, and only rarely misunderstood. I could, for instance, have called out, “Dinner is ready. All come downstairs and eat it!” But although technically this would consist of an informational statement and a related command, it would in fact be unacceptably redundant. People do not take kindly to being told the obvious. We use words with more economy than that, although every language has its own permitted omissions and inclusions.

We turn to our second question, How do people understand us when we mean something other than what we say? Perhaps the best brief answer to this is that they speak the same way themselves: the hearer on one occasion is the speaker on many others, so he instantly recognises mitigations and a variety of verbal shorthands when he hears them. However, such instant recognition occurs only when verbal conventions are shared. Foreigners learning English are often perplexed to know what we mean, even though they understand the words, because they do not know the English conventions. And Englishmen abroad can appear quite offensive if they instinctively use typical British understatement. Shared conventions are clearly essential to successful communication.

Some conventions are understood throughout a whole language community, others in a much smaller community such as those sharing technical knowledge, and some only in a very small community such as the family. My mother’s roundabout request for the window to be shut involved an intra-family convention: all our family knew that if my mother asked a question about a draught, she wanted the window shut. But the convention of informing people that a meal is ready, while intending a directive (“Come and eat it”), is widely observed in the English-language community. A stranger might have to reason their way to the intended meaning, but the community that knows the convention recognises it at once: it has been said that way so often that the association is automatic. Constant use ensures that the conventional signal is immediately and readily understood.

To get back to our original examples: what are we to say is the import of “Does anyone feel a draught?” or “Dinner’s ready!”? The conclusion reached so far is that they are both conventionalised directives having the form of an informational stimulus recognised as such by a speech community.

Thus we allow for conventional usage to be the determining factor in a certain kind of double-import utterance. However, it is not the sole factor, nor does it provide an adequate explanation of all double-import utterances. A principle with much wider explanatory powers will be considered in the next section.

8.5 The purposive chain

As we study the purposes underlying communications, we must make explicit certain factors that are highly relevant to our analysis. First, human beings are reasonably consistent. They may have very general purposes under which are subsumed more specific purposes, but they will relate them to each other in consistent ways. People’s purposes arise from their personality, their experiences, their values, their desires—and there is a directionality about all this which we will shortly consider.

Second, human beings are purposive. Speech and all other human activity has some purpose behind it. Usually we know the purpose or can make a good guess. When we are puzzled as to the purpose behind an utterance or action, we feel uncomfortable and want to enquire further.

Bearing these two factors in mind, let us consider how they relate to meaning, and especially to double import.

We said that there is a directionality connected with human purposes. By that we meant that it is frequently possible to trace a coherent path from the person’s experience and knowledge of the world, through his reactions and evaluations, to his aims and purposes. Purposes do not exist in isolation from personality: one appreciates and values certain things, and from this arise related desires, and from these in turn arise one’s purposes.

It follows that we readily trace a connected path in our thinking between beliefs, emotions, and valuations, and the purposes that spring from them. This works both ways. If a person expresses a purpose, we instinctively trace it back to the underlying values and facts. If, for example, a friend says, “I’m going to the doctor,” we assume he is unwell; if he says, “I’m going to buy some tobacco,” we assume he has little or no tobacco left. If a person expresses an emotion or evaluation, or even reports a fact, we trace a connected path to whatever purposes are consistent with those facts and evaluations. Thus, if someone says, “I’ve torn my dress,” we offer her a needle and thread, assuming that she has the purpose of mending it. If someone says, “It’s ages since we went to the cinema,” we assume that the speaker has the purpose of remedying the situation and going again soon.

Now, this intermeshing of what we know and believe, how we evaluate and react to that knowledge, and the purposes which result, has a strong directionality about it. Purposes interest us intensely, and if we hear information given, or opinions and values expressed, our minds instinctively move along the chain to the purposes to which they lead. Unsolicited information, in and of itself, is of little interest: we normally assume that the information has been given for a further purpose, and we are usually right. Similarly, if someone expresses an opinion or evaluation, it is frequently with the added purpose of persuading his hearers to agree with him, with the further hope or intention that they will act in certain ways as a result. Advertisers and politicians constantly adopt this approach. If a politician says, “The policies presented to us in this manifesto are ill considered and inadequate,” he is not simply making an evaluation: he means, “Do not vote for the party that produced this manifesto.” He is nudging his hearers along the purposive chain.

Although we can reason in either direction along the chain (from a known purpose to assumed facts, or from known facts to an assumed purpose), the mental transition towards purposes is an underlying and permanent trend in human thinking. Our second factor comes into play here: we constantly assume purposiveness.

In analysing the meaning of utterances, it is essential to bear in mind that this constant assumption of purposes is all-pervasive, and is a prior factor in any communication whatever. As was pointed out in chapter 4, before a conversation even starts the participants are aware of their setting and of each other, and this awareness provides a framework in the light of which all the ensuing utterances are generated and understood. Part of this framework is the awareness shared by all the participants of the purposes relevant to the situation, both the general purposes common to most of the human race and the specific known purposes of individual participants. We are dealing with a dynamic situation: people’s thoughts are not static, but in a constant directional flow, constantly pushing on to the most relevant purposes that can be reached. Knowing the purposes of the participants in a conversation is rather like knowing the topic of a chapter or the theme of a book: it is part of the conceptual umbrella, the conceptual framework, within which interpretation goes on.

Thus, the mere mention of a certain fact is enough to lead the mind on to related evaluations and purposes. In the light of what we said earlier about economy with words, there may be no need to say any more than the fact. Thus my informing the family that dinner was ready was quite an adequate utterance to fulfil my directive purposes: their minds would lead on naturally from fact to evaluation (“Oh, good!”) to action (“Let’s go and eat straight away.”) In this example, of course, the movement along the purposive chain is institutionalised, fixed by much repetition. But exactly the same analysis will account for double import in many other cases which have not been conventionalised in this way.

If my husband says to me on a Wednesday afternoon, “There’s a football match on tonight,” I realise that he is not simply giving me information (especially since he is aware that my interest in football is minimal). Rather, he is warning me that there will be heavy traffic congestion on our route to church, and that we will have to have an early meal and leave earlier than usual if we want to avoid being late at the meeting we usually attend. Similarly, if a friend invites me to her home and then adds, “I’m afraid my mother is elderly and can’t stand much noise,” I realise that I had better not bring my small son along. Our minds constantly move in this way from facts to evaluations, and from there to actions and purposes.

Sometimes, of course, the connection needs to be worked out consciously, reasoning our way along the purposive chain rather than assuming it. The fact that this has to be done consciously in cases of doubtful interpretation arises from the more fundamental fact that we are unconsciously operating this way all the time: in normal communication it is going on unnoticed, and because normal communication is usually successful, it remains unnoticed. But movement along the purposive chain is always present.

Now, where does this leave us in our attempt to analyse double-import utterances? When my mother asked, “Does anyone feel a draught from that window?,” was this utterance information-seeking or directive? With respect to the referential material, it seemed information-seeking, but with respect to the speaker’s purposes, it was directive. (She was, in fact, quite taken aback on one occasion when a visitor responded, “No, thank you; not at all.” She had intended to stimulate action, not elicit information.) The utterance should be interpreted as a directive, not only because the speaker intended it that way, but because it can now be seen to be appropriate to her intention: it was meant to launch the hearers in a certain direction along the purposive chain.

We thus conclude that if the import of the referential material and the import intended in the situation appear to be different, the utterance should always be interpreted as far along the purposive chain as is appropriate in those circumstances. The reason for this is simply that speakers communicate, and hearers interpret, with the purposive chain as one of the parameters of their thinking. Hence interpretations that make use of that parameter are most likely to be correct. Since it is useful to be able to distinguish such double-import utterances from straightforward ones (e.g., “Would someone please shut the window?”), we call examples with extended significance indirect, or hidden, directives.

8.6 Informationals with a variety of purposes

Although utterances must be interpreted in the light of the known purposes of the participants concerned, the further along the chain the utterance already is in its overt expression, the less need there will be for such interpretation. The utterance “Ouch! Get off my toe!” is already transparently clear in its meaning: it is, in its verbal expression, already at the directive end of the chain.

It follows that utterances right at the beginning of the chain, that is, informationals, most stand in need of purposive interpretation. Information can be given for a wide variety of purposes, and it is important for correct interpretation or analysis that the right purpose be known in each instance. Let us suppose that a man says to his colleague, “I hear that Brewster is getting transferred to the London office.” He may have been saying this simply to inform his colleague of a fact that would be of interest to him. But he may have wanted to encourage him (if the colleague disliked Brewster and would welcome his departure). It may have been preparatory to a suggestion (“So why don’t you apply for his position?”) or possibly to a complaint (“If there are many more transfers, we’ll be working round the clock”). So we see that a single statement, with a straightforward meaning, can function in a conversation with several different values. It is certainly information-providing, but why is the information given?

We should notice, however, that in these examples, we are not dealing with genuine cases of multiple import, but rather with a variety of cases of informational import, each with a different situational significance or function. “I hear that Brewster is being transferred” may be the preface to a grumble or a suggestion, but in either case it is information-providing. The determining factors in analysing this utterance as purely informational are that, in any one of the situations envisaged, the information was new to the hearer and the speaker was himself intending to carry on the communication with a complaint or suggestion. He was not expecting his colleague to supply these, either by convention or by pursuing the purposive chain. There are therefore no grounds for calling the utterance a hidden expressive or a hidden directive. Rather, since the speaker himself provided the next step along the chain overtly, the analysis of the information-providing starting point is that it is simply informational.

Of course, virtually all information is coloured, as in this example, by higher-level factors; it enters into a complex network of higher-level relations which invest it with specific contextual significance. We will study these factors and relationships in chapters 13 and 14. But we must make a distinction between straightforward informationals with some higher-level significance and multiple-import informationals which leave the hearer to supply such significance.

The context of an informational utterance may itself determine just how far along the purposive chain one is expected to go. For example, in situations where a question has been posed and an explicit answer is expected, the principle of moving along the purposive chain is overruled: the exact bit of required information must be supplied, not just a hint in the right direction. Similarly, for discourses that have an avowed purpose of providing information (e.g., textbooks and the minutes of meetings) moving along the purposive chain is not appropriate: information is being given for its own sake and it is to be accepted as such.

Confusing claims are sometimes made that a given isolated utterance could have different imports in different contexts. For instance, it is said that, “Can you reach the hammer?” could be either information-seeking or directive. This may be true, but it is completely irrelevant to our present study. Meaning is always communicated in a context: to remove the context is to render all discussion of specific meanings impossible. A given verbal form may well have different imports in different contexts, but it does not follow that it has multiple import. Rather, in isolation it has no import, while in any given context it has one only.

8.7 Multiple import in longer messages

For purposes of illustration we have used short examples throughout this chapter, but it is worth pointing out that the human mind works in exactly the same way where longer messages are concerned. Again, it is informational messages, as previously discussed, which are most likely to carry a covert import in addition to the obvious one. Advertisements are sometimes worded as if they were purely informational, but the account of a romantic evening makes explicit mention of a particular wine or an expensive kind of jewellery. The reader is meant to make the transition from “pleasant occasions are accompanied by X” to “X is good/desirable” and then to “buy X.”

An example less common in the West than in other cultures is the parable. (Parables are familiar to Westerners, if at all, through the New Testament.) The story of the prodigal son is, at face value, just a story about a spendthrift who ended up penniless, returned home repentant, was welcomed, and was bitterly envied by his elder brother. But undoubtedly the hearers were meant to make the progression, first to an evaluation (repentance is good, jealousy is bad) and then to a directive (do repent, don’t be jealous). In such a parable, any individual informational is just that, an informational about an imaginary world. But at the level of the total message, multiple import certainly applies.

Suggestions for further study

1. Ranking of the three imports

The three imports have no inherent ranking with respect to each other. The order informational-volitional-expressive is chosen in chapter 7 for pedagogical reasons. The order informational-expressive-volitional (this chapter) represents a psychological reality. And Halliday claims in Halliday & Hasan 1985:15–17 that “information talking” “in the life history of a human child . . . arises last of all.”

2. Multiple import (sections 8.4, 8.5)

For discussions of utterances with multiple import, see Givón, 1984:814–818; Schiffrin, 1994:61–91; Searle, 1979:viii, 30–57; Wilson & Sperber, 1984:21–41.

3. The purposive chain (section 8.5)

For the grounding of action in a person’s perceptions, feelings and thoughts, see Bruner 1986:69. For a hint of goal-orientedness not unrelated to the purposive chain, see Chafe, 1979:172–73. As an analytical tool, the purposive chain has a wider usefulness than might appear from this chapter. For examples of its use in text analysis, see section 13.4.2, also Callow & Callow, 1992:29–30.

9

PRESENTING MESSAGES APPROPRIATELY

9.1 A problem: parts of communications without import

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9.4 Longer utterances as message support

9.5 A problem relating to informationals

9.1 A problem: parts of communications without import

Throughout this book, and especially in the previous chapter, we have made it clear that human communication is purposive, and that if we are going to analyse the meaning structure of messages, then the purposes of the message sender must be known. At this point, however, we have to confess that we have ignored a certain amount of the data: some parts of communications do not seem to fulfil any of the three basic purposes.

If I say to my daughter, “When the milkman comes, could you please pay him for me?,” then the overall import is obviously volitional: I am requesting my daughter to pay the milkman. But what is the import of “When the milkman comes”? It neither informs, nor attempts to change things, nor expresses. But if it has none of these purposes, then what is it there for? Surely it must have some purpose. Must we deduce, then, that communication has other purposes, over and above the three we have discussed?

Other examples were presented earlier which would illustrate the same point; for example: “What is the name of that flower we found by the marsh?” “I think she probably filed it in the blue cabinet.” “I wouldn’t mind, if I could just finish this first.” In all these examples the overall import is clear; it is seen in the part of the utterance which is not italicised. But what is the purpose of the italicised part? The italicised part of each example seems to have nothing in common with the italicised part of the others apart from the fact that they can’t stand alone. If said alone they would definitely constitute an incomplete message; the hearer would be waiting for more. But to say that they constitute incomplete utterances is hardly adequate as an analysis.

If we try to dig further into the nature of these “bits” that attach to messages, two interesting facts emerge. First, they are not grammatically parallel. Our examples show subordinate clauses of different kinds (description, condition) and a main clause (“I think”). So we cannot simply say main clauses signal import and subordinate clauses do not—some main clauses also seem devoid of import.

Second, there is no clear correlation of any kind of subordinate material with any one communicative purpose. If I say no more than “When the milkman comes,” the message I am conveying to my daughter is not only incomplete, but its purpose is still completely unknown. That particular introduction conveys nothing of the purpose which is to come. In fact, any one of the three imports could follow:

“When the milkman comes, he’ll be bringing some bread as well.” (informational)

“When the milkman comes, please pay him for me.” (volitional)

“When the milkman comes, I hope he’ll remember the extra pint.” (expressive)

So we seem to have discovered some elements in everyday speech which are completely neutral as to import. They attach to messages, but never constitute messages in themselves. This does not mean that we must abandon our conviction that every message must have an import. Indeed, we could partially define a message as consisting of purposive (i.e., import-bearing) referential material. But we have to come to terms with the fact that this does not handle all the data. Something else is going on, as yet unaccounted for.

9.2 Solution: non-import-bearing elements as message support

In the previous examples it is obvious that the referential material which is not communicating some import is not the core of the message. The import-bearing content would make good sense, and its thrust and purpose would be in no way impaired, if the peripheral material were omitted. And if this peripheral material is not contributing to the import of the message, we must assume that it is making some other contribution. And so it does. In fact it can make a wide variety of different contributions, and we will sort these into categories shortly so as to grasp their different functions more readily. One thing, however, which is in common to all this peripheral material is that it in some way supports the central message.

We can therefore consider messages as consisting of two kinds of referential material: message core and message support. Core material is presented directly to the hearer with some purpose—informingly, expressively, or involving the intentions and will. The message core implies some kind of commitment on the part of the speaker (belief, genuineness, desire), and puts a corresponding responsibility on the hearer (acceptance, solidarity, compliance). Message support, on the other hand, puts no responsibility on the hearer. It makes no demands of him. It simply assists him to understand and receive the message of the core.

However, such supporting material does not come out of nowhere, haphazardly. Though its role is a supplementary one, it is played in a very structured way. This structure arises from the mind of the speaker, who is operating simultaneously at two different levels. His conscious purpose determines the nature of the message core, which is the import-bearing material. But he also has a constant, underlying purpose of communicating that message successfully. This he achieves by monitoring the needs of the hearer, and this gives rise to the supporting elements in the message.

In the next section, we will consider various categories of support material in turn, relating them to the specific needs of the hearer which they are intended to meet. But all alike have their origin in the monitoring activity of the speaker.

9.3 The functions of message support

The primary purpose of monitoring is to make sure that the message is being understood: without this, the communication is useless. In addition, however, the speaker wants it to be understood accurately; he wants to forestall misinterpretations. Nor will he be satisfied if his message is comprehended perfectly, but rejected—he is not wanting simply to make his purposes known, but to achieve them. He therefore presents his message in the way he considers most acceptable to the hearer. These three factors in communicative success give rise to three categories of support material, which promote, respectively, comprehension, accuracy, and acceptability.

9.3.1 Comprehension

9.3.1.1 Locating the message correctly

No message can be properly understood if it cannot be “located,” that is, assigned to some definite area in the network of the mind. We saw in chapter 4 that the participants in a communication start with a considerable amount of conceptual material held in common, foregrounded by their shared surroundings and purposes. But often the referential material that the speaker plans to communicate is not part of this foregrounded material. In that case, the speaker needs to provide some kind of verbal stimulus to foreground for the hearer the appropriate part of the network into which to integrate the message as he receives it.

Thus when I say to my daughter, “When the milkman comes,” I am deliberately foregrounding the appropriate part of her mental network, shining the spotlight on the part of her experience she will need in order to receive my message. The area under the spotlight can be highly specific, as in the case of the milkman, where one particular person on one particular occasion is foregrounded. It can just as well be very general, as in “Now, about the conservation issue.” It can consist of a clause or longer construction, or a brief phrase or even a word, as in “Traffic! You’d think the Council could have done something by now.” In written materials an underlined heading is often enough to pinpoint the area required.

Such foregrounding (unless provided nonverbally) is always needed at the beginning of a communication. It may well be needed also at intervals throughout, as new referential areas are introduced, or as the original one is reactivated or developed. Thus we get “Still on the subject of conservation” (reactivation), or “Let’s get back to that point that Jim made” (reactivation after digression), or “Now, to take that a step further” (development).

Frequently, as a communication or conversation develops, it is necessary to make contact with backgrounded conceptual material, in order to bring into the active foreground something which had not been needed at an earlier stage but now has a part to play. Thus we get “What was the name of that flower we found by the marsh?” where a specific flower, noticed on a previous occasion, is being foregrounded, presumably in the middle of a longer conversation of a botanical nature.

Such foregrounding is usually done with as much economy as possible. Only if the link-up fails and the hearer is unable to pinpoint the desired information are further clues added until conceptual contact is made, as in “. . . no, not her, a much smaller girl, with a nice smile . . . a medic, I think, from up north . . . yes, her. Well . . .”

It is important to remember that such signals can foreground concepts that have rich experiential content. Taken as a classroom example, the locating trigger “Now, about the conservation issue” foregrounds an area of great generality. Everything from the destruction of rain forests to the recycling of domestic waste becomes thereby available for use, but none of these details are explicitly foregrounded. If, however, the same verbal trigger is used by the chairman of the village council in the course of a committee meeting, then what is foregrounded in the mind of the committee members is not the conservation issue in general, but specifically what they discussed under that heading at the last committee meeting—the protection of some local woodland, for example. A very small trigger is enough to locate specific material if the area of shared experience and shared expectancy is specific.

9.3.1.2 Correlating the message coherently

It was pointed out in chapter 3 that we cannot hold anything in our minds unless it stands in some coherent relation with the rest of our stored conceptual material. Since a speaker presenting a message wants the hearer to be able to grasp it, he obviously wants to present it to him as cohering acceptably and relevantly with what he already knows. As long as the communication continues, the speaker is constantly monitoring, retrospectively, how the message has been received. At the same time he is trying to assess ahead of time any possible difficulties the hearer may experience in receiving and filing the message. It follows that from time to time the speaker may adapt his message, expanding here and commenting there, so as to forestall any misunderstanding or perplexity on the part of the hearer.

This gives rise to message support of a different kind from that which “locates” the message. The problem envisaged by the speaker is not, Will the hearer be able to locate this material correctly? but, Will the hearer be able to integrate this consistently with his existing knowledge store? And in trying to meet this problem the speaker will build in explanations of various kinds. Explanations can be short or long, full or formulaic: “Due to exceptional circumstances, Bill can’t be with us tonight.” “By driving all night with scant regard for speed limits, he was at her side by dawn.”

Sometimes it is a surprising fact that needs explanation; at other times it is an apparently contradictory one that needs resolving. So we get comments like “Despite the commonly held view that” or “According to the latest evidence, however . . .”

Our inherent assumption of purposiveness, which we mentioned earlier, is relevant here also. Hearers sometimes have difficulty in accepting information, even quite straightforward information, if they cannot discern the purposes involved: it seems as if they are unable or reluctant to file it without the purposive element attached. Thus comments which are not in other respects particularly relevant may be added in order to forestall a puzzled “Why?” So we say, “I was going to the shop for some sugar . . . ,” or “Could I borrow your pen?—just to jot down an address,” or “We’ll be going to France for a bit of a refresher,” and so on.

A word of warning here, however. Different languages differ greatly as to which purposes they expect to have made explicit, and which they are prepared to leave “hovering in the wings.” In Ghana I used to find that Kasena people would often finish for me a sentence which, from their point of view, I had left unfinished. If I said, “I would like some water,” they would add “to drink.” If I said, “I must go and cook food for my family,” they would add “so that they may eat.” We were all assuming the same purposive activity, but what for me could be left unsaid was for them an obligatory element in information structure.

9.3.2 Accuracy

It is possible for a hearer to understand a message perfectly and yet, perhaps subconsciously, draw false conclusions from it. So the speaker is constantly monitoring for misinterpretation and taking steps to counteract it, providing appropriate support material with this end in view.

Speakers also constantly signal how much reliance a hearer can place on the content of the communication. Thus we get “I think she probably filed it in the blue cabinet” (indicating a degree of uncertainty), or “I know for sure she left yesterday morning” (indicating complete certainty), or “If we are to believe the overnight headlines, he is in disgrace” (indicating a slight doubt and passing the responsibility back to another source).

Very often the core material in the message is meant to be applicable with certain restrictions or in certain circumstances. In such cases the limitations have to be made clear, as in the earlier example: “I wouldn’t mind, if I could just finish this first.” Here the speaker is expressing general acquiescence, but only with the restriction he specifies.

A different kind of limitation is an exception to a universal statement. An example would be, “We all got together for Christmas except Joan and her husband, of course.”

Once more we must bear in mind that languages vary in the meaning of terms like “all” and “every.” In English, if I say, “Everyone’s going down with flu this winter,” I do not mean literal universality, but neither am I lying. This typical and acceptable English usage allows generalisations which refer with less than mathematical exactness, but not all languages allow this. Similarly, restrictiveness is handled in different ways. If I say, “I’ll be cleaning the spare bedroom this morning, so please could you move your papers,” there are no built-in restrictions in my communication. But there are languages in which the hearer would understand this to mean that I would not be cleaning any other bedroom, only the one specified. Obviously this can give rise to problems in a cross-cultural situation, but in normal communication there is no difficulty, as the monitoring process takes account of such assumptions, shared alike by speaker and hearer.

9.3.3 Acceptability

The form in which a speaker chooses to present his message is affected in almost every aspect by his desire to communicate acceptably (unless, of course, he is being deliberately offensive). We will consider two areas in particular, one involving social convention, the other at a more personal level, as they relate to message support.

9.3.3.1 Social acceptability

When speakers feel they are operating on the margins of social acceptability, they take measures to ease the situation, usually by the use of standardised courtesy expressions. If I am addressing a total stranger, for instance, without any introductory circumstances, I preface the message with “Excuse me.” (There are cultures where this would be totally inadequate; in Ghana the only acceptable preface is formalised enquiries after the health and well-being of the addressee’s entire family.)

To contradict or interrupt are both considered socially unacceptable, unless suitably buffered. If, in a formal situation, I wish to correct someone who has made a factually incorrect statement, I start with “I beg your pardon, but . . .” If I want a chance to speak when someone else has been holding the floor for too long, I don’t simply break in with my comments; I start by saying, “If I might just say a word here,” or “If I might just interrupt for a few moments.”

9.3.3.2 Personal acceptability

Social acceptability shades into personal acceptability. Where it is not the fact of speaking, but the content of what is said that is in danger of being unacceptable, then speakers soften their communications in various ways (see sections 7.3.2.4 and 7.3.3.4). Thus we say, “If you don’t mind my asking, can you really afford this trip?”

Negative evaluations are often unacceptable, so the speaker softens them somewhat by putting them in the form of a question: “Do you really think that was a nice thing to do?” (= that was not a nice thing to do). Sometimes a negative evaluation is further softened by a vocative, especially one with an element of endearment, as in “Meg, dearie, are you sure your parents would be happy about this?”

Directives are frequently modified so that there will be no loss of personal warmth between speaker and hearer: “I’m wondering if you could possibly help with the overseas tea” or “I’d love to hear about your holiday in Austria.” These examples are theoretically capable of analysis either as expressives or directives. If taken as expressives, one has to call upon the purposive chain to carry the speaker’s desire forward into the request which is undoubtedly intended. I prefer to analyse these as directives combined with mitigations, which is in keeping with the principle of interpreting as far along the purposive chain as possible. A similar analysis would apply to other mitigating formulae such as “Would you mind giving me a hand with this?” and “Would it be asking too much to put you in charge of the publicity?”

9.4 Longer utterances as message support

Many different surface forms besides subordinate clauses can have a supporting function. So far our examples have been no longer than a sentence, and many have consisted only of a nominal phrase. But a moment’s thought makes it clear that identical message functions could be performed by much longer utterances. The example “I wouldn’t mind, if I could just finish this first” could easily have been said more fully: “I wouldn’t mind at all. But I’ve got something I’m working on right now. Would it be all right if I finished it first?” The function of the expanded form—its significance within the message—is exactly the same as that of the shorter form; that is, it puts a limitation on the core material.

Other examples can be similarly expanded. Instead of saying to my daughter, “When the milkman comes, could you please pay him for me?” I could easily say, “Oh, yes, the milkman will probably be coming round today some time. Could you please . . .” The difference in surface form relates back to my estimate of how accessible milkman-related information is in my daughter’s network. The longer form assumes less accessibility. I need to tell her that he is coming rather than assume it. But the function is the same in both cases, that of foregrounding the appropriate context for the request that follows.

This can easily be confirmed by considering what my daughter’s reaction would have been if I had said, “The milkman will be coming round today some time,” and then stopped. She would have waited, slightly puzzled, mentally poised to hear more. With foreground provided, she would have been waiting for the message to follow. She certainly would not have thought that my comment about the milkman constituted the message. In other words, the expectation aroused was exactly the same as with the shorter form. Both had the function of foregrounding, although one was longer and more detailed.

We shall see, in chapter 10 and also in Part 2, that supporting elements can frequently be quite lengthy. An explanation, for instance, can consist of a whole paragraph. So can the setting of a story. A summary or evaluation acting as a progress marker can also be lengthy. These will receive more detailed consideration in due course. Our main concern here is with the fact that supporting material is identifiable in function under a variety of surface forms, whether that form is a subordinate clause, a paragraph, or some totally different signal. Since message support arises from the speaker’s desire to communicate successfully and always relates in some way to his monitoring activity, it is a meaning universal and will be found in some form in any language.

9.5 A problem relating to informationals

The examples in section 9.4 presented us with something of a contradiction. The utterance “The milkman will probably be coming today” seems to be information-providing, yet we analysed it as message support, not message core. We seem to be denying it informational import. In what possible sense can information not be informational?

We have already faced a problem of this sort in connection with commissives. There our problem was apparent informationals to which we were allocating a different import further along the purposive chain. Here our problem is of apparent informationals that carry no import at all. Obviously, utterances that look like informationals can have a wide range of different functions in a way that volitionals and expressives do not.

The explanation is a straightforward one. Any communication whatsoever involves weaving conceptual threads together, either linking a new concept to known ones, or using an existing concept in new ways. And if this weaving simultaneously claims to match reality, then it is certainly presenting itself to the hearer as information whether previously known or not: the question is, how does this reality-matching material relate to the speaker’s purpose? What is its import, if any?

The question seems puzzling only if we confuse the roles of speaker and hearer with respect to import. The import of a message is determined by the speaker’s intention, not by the hearer’s interpretation. If I say to my daughter, “The milkman will probably be calling round this morning,” I may coincidentally be telling her something she did not previously know, but that was not my purpose in communicating, which was directive. The information about the milkman was given, not in order to be informative, but in order to access a particular area in my daughter’s mind. So to analyse that part of the message as informational would be to obscure its real function. A hearer-centred view of meaning might well analyse this preliminary utterance as informational: a speaker-centred view has more to say about it than that.

In any case, the problem seems to be mainly theoretical: in practice hearers have no difficulty in assigning support status to some fact-providing parts of the incoming message. This is because they process it not bit by bit in isolation, but in the light of the wider context and the known purposes of speakers. Speakers do not purposefully communicate information that is trivial, irrelevant, or already known to the hearer. In all these instances the hearer rightly assumes another purpose and assigns support status to the information, at which point he is cognitively in an appropriate state to receive the rest of the message.

It is important, then, to bear in mind that the weaving together of certain conceptual threads does not in itself carry import: the same concepts can be woven together in a variety of ways. It is the speaker’s purpose, whether communicative or supportive, that determines the pattern of the weave, and hence its interpretation and analysis.

Suggestions for further study

For a discussion of relative clauses with respect to accessibility of information, see Givón, 1990:645–49, 680. See also Wierzbicka, 1980:316–23. Relevant to this discussion, but without specific reference to subordination, is Chafe, 1992:270, where he discusses the existence of a “holding area” of ideas kept accessible for later reactivation.

For a discussion of conditional clauses, see Givón, 1990:828–35, also Cobuild English Grammar, 1990:349–53.

10

THE SHAPING OF LONGER MESSAGES

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10.1 Cognitive characteristics of messages

Let us gather together what we have already studied about man’s cognitive characteristics, and see how these impose their stamp not simply on short, conversational utterances, but on longer and more deliberate communications.

The characteristics of conceptual material in storage (see section 3.2.1, 2) are also operative when it is being communicated to others. So we find that, like stored material, longer messages are organised in nesting units which are consistently interrelated. In storage such interrelated units are organised for accessibility, but in communications they are organised according to the purpose of the message sender; purposiveness is, more than any other, the cognitive characteristic which determines the arrangement of the interrelated units.

All message units (units of meaning) are thought units, thought units directed towards a recipient. Each unit, regardless of its size, has both content and purpose. We can therefore define any meaning unit in terms of its reference (what it is about), and its purposive significance (its contribution to the fulfilling of the message sender’s purpose). Moreover, every message is addressed to some audience. The speaker or writer has a message plan in his own mind as a referential-purposive structure, and he communicates this to the intended audience by building up in their minds a conceptual structure corresponding to his own.

When we consider deliberately planned messages (as distinct from casual, unplanned conversations), the writer or speaker’s strategy in planning and communicating his message should be reflected in our method of analysis. Although the recipient of a message receives it in linear fashion, bit by bit as he reads or hears it, the message sender normally has the whole message roughly outlined in his mind from the start. The details may not yet be formulated, but he knows what he intends to talk about: the subject matter is relatively fixed in advance. Similarly, the purposive structure is already decided with the chosen audience in mind. It is in the light of these already established factors that the message sender presents the details of the message. Each new element slots into a place which is part of a plan, a plan which is being revealed to the hearer in more and more detail as the message progresses. This plan should likewise play a key role in our analysis. The significance of any given part can only be understood in the light of the whole: a top-down approach is essential.

10.2 The units constituting messages

The cognitive characteristics briefly outlined in the preceding section determine the structure of all messages. But what are the nesting units that constitute this structure? What form does the “nesting” take? And how does the speaker’s purpose affect the organisation of the message?

Messages are made up of two different kinds of units, corresponding roughly to clauses on the one hand, and to groups of clauses (such as sentences or paragraphs) on the other. The smallest meaning unit, often represented in surface structure by a clause, is what we are calling a proposition. The larger unit, which consists of groupings of propositions, we are calling a configuration. Before discussing these in detail, however, we will consider the structural patterns of the message as a whole, in accordance with the top-down procedure (section 10.1) which establishes high level contexts before lower level units are discussed.

10.2.1 The message as a patterned hierarchy

Our minds have to group things together in order to think or comprehend or remember. Hence the message sender presents the addressee with a message organised in groups, not in simple succession. In surface-structure terms, a discourse is built up not clause by clause, but sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph. Smaller units build up into larger ones hierarchically.

It remains true, of course, that the message is a linear one, but we have now added to this linearity an important extra dimension: as each new part of the message is transmitted it is not added on to the end of a string, but rather takes its place in a complex interrelated structure. By virtue of occurring where it does linearly, it has a place in successive higher-level units and stands in some kind of meaningful relation to those units, not simply to the parts of the message on either side of it.

Of course, at any given point in mid-message some of those hierarchical units will still be under construction; nevertheless, each new element relates to them and helps them towards completion. The completed or partially completed groupings form an essential part of the context in terms of which each new element in the message is understood. Nor should we underestimate the importance of the hearer’s expectations. The context provided by the message, even in its incomplete state, has roused in the hearer certain expectations as to how the message is going to develop and be completed. It is in terms of these expectations that the hearer absorbs each new element in the unfolding message.

Thus every element in a message is multifunctional. Speaking again in surface-structure terms, a clause in mid-discourse may complete a sentence which initiates a paragraph which in turn has its part to play in still larger groupings.

But such a hierarchy of nesting units is still too flat and two-dimensional. Another factor, that of prominence, must be added.

10.2.2 Prominence in the hierarchy

Every unit in the hierarchy is made up of smaller units, but these do not make a uniform contribution to the pattern of the larger whole. Commonly one of these smaller units is more important than the others. This prominent unit forms the central point in the patterning, while the other units are attached to it in a variety of possible relations.

This tendency to establish a focal point, to group things not simply as a cluster but as nucleus and satellite, seems to pervade human thought and activity; we find it in art and in music as well as in language. In meaning structure and surface structure alike, the nuclear element is considered to be the one that is essential if the larger unit to which it belongs is to perform its function at all. If the nuclear element is omitted, the unit falls apart: the satellite elements are pointless without it. If, on the other hand, the satellite elements are omitted, the nuclear element functions just as before.

However, the terms “nucleus” and “satellite” provide us with too watertight a dichotomy, as if every pattern constituent must inevitably carry one or the other label. In the study of meaning we will find it more useful to think in terms of degrees of prominence. This allows us to consider a nuclear element as being simultaneously prominent in some respects and less prominent in others, while the satellite elements are not uniformly non-prominent but differ from each other in their prominence value. This, of course, is a much less tidy picture than a straightforward nucleus-periphery contrast, but we need more flexibility than the two-way choice affords us.

Structurally, for example, some units are more prominent than others. But prominence applies also at the level of individual concepts: in any message, some concepts have a central role while others are of only incidental interest. Thus prominence is a factor which must be allowed for in message content as well as message structure, the two being constantly interrelated.

Prominence derives from several sources. Some of the things we talk about seem inherently more prominent than others. A famine gets bigger headlines than a shortage of butter; a royal wedding is more important than a quick ceremony in a registry office; a mountain outranks a boulder, and the sun the moon. We call this “referential prominence” and will have occasion to refer to it later.

Some concepts in a message are prominent not because they are inherently important, but because they are important in this particular message. The message sender chooses to focus attention on one selected character or situation or idea. This selective focus may be maintained throughout several units, or throughout the whole message: the concept concerned remains persistently activated, while other concepts are activated much more briefly. Such sustained focus of attention is called “topical prominence” and is discussed in chapter 14.

Prominence relates to purpose also. Anything relating to human aims and purposes acquires prominence thereby. A dropped cigarette stub seems insignificant until one realises that it is the vital clue in a detective story. Putting a ring on a finger is a commonplace act, but it acquires considerable prominence in the context of a wedding ceremony. Moreover, something that appears trivial to one person will have great importance to someone else: if my child is entered for the egg-and-spoon race on the village sports day, then that race matters more to me than all the other races put together, while my neighbour remains indifferent to everything except the sack race.

We will be considering various kinds of prominence in some detail as we proceed, tracing them to their sources and giving them technical labels for convenience. But at this point in our discussion the most important thing to grasp is that our hierarchy of nesting units is pervaded by degrees of prominence from beginning to end. The message sender interweaves the elements of his message using a great variety of patterns, making one element prominent and minimising another in order to convey the exact impression he intends. A pure hierarchy, without prominence, might suffice for the analysis of a railway timetable or the multiplication table; but for the analysis of communications steeped in the purposes and personalities of the communicators, we must allow for the constant and generous use of prominence devices.

10.2.3 Configurations

The largest unit of meaning is, of course, the message itself. A message is made up of configurations. If the message is a long one, these configurations will nest within each other, forming layers in the hierarchy. They may be thought of as corresponding roughly to chapters, sections, or paragraphs in the surface structure of a communication.

There is a cognitive reality corresponding to these higher level units. As mentioned earlier (section 3.2.1), we can hold a lot of detail in our minds under one conceptual umbrella, being aware in a general way that it is a unitary whole. It would be impossible for a writer to plan a message if he had to map it out detail by detail in advance. Instead, he works it out in terms of high level concepts, leaving the details to be filled in later. Similarly, the recipient of the message cannot remember every detail of the part already received; he holds it filed in memory as larger, more generalised conceptual units, into which he slots new material as he receives it.

High level concepts are important cognitive entities, readily available “in the wings” when something else is under attention, and providing access to detail when this is required.

Those accustomed to thinking primarily in terms of surface structure might well wonder why only one intermediate-sized meaning unit, the configuration, is considered to be the counterpart of such diverse discourse units as chapter and paragraph. The reason is straightforward. From the point of view of their underlying meanings, these units differ only in size. The reason is that each configuration is defined, as all units of meaning are, by reference and significance; that is to say, they exhibit internal homogeneity of content and consistency of purpose. High-level configurations may well have a very general topic and purpose; lower-level configurations are often more specific. But this is just a matter of degree and provides us with no theoretical grounds for distinguishing large configurations from smaller ones: the kinds of unit and the relations between them are the same.

The term “configuration” has been chosen because it seems appropriate for a pattern-bearing unit and because it is not already in common use for any grammatical, surface-structure unit of discourse. It is important to keep meaning units distinct in our minds from their surface-structure counterparts, not least because their boundaries do not always coincide. However, the multiplicity of terms for intermediate-level units of discourse (chapters and paragraphs in books, sections in official documents, acts and scenes in drama) provides us with ready-made terminology if we should find it necessary to distinguish configurations that differ in size. We can talk about a “chapter configuration” or a “paragraph configuration” or a “scene configuration,” thus making clear that we are talking about meaning structure, while at the same time giving some indication of hierarchical ranking.

Each configuration making up the message has something to contribute to its purposive patterning—it helps the message forward in some way. At the end of a configuration the addressee may say inwardly, “Ah, now I see what the problem is,” or “I wonder how he will counter that one,” or “I would have drawn a different conclusion myself.” The addressee is at each stage aware of what significant part of the plot or argument has been reached: each configuration has moved it forward to some extent. Thus we see that configurations are units not only of message structure, but also of message purpose.

The configurations comprising messages are themselves composed of smaller and smaller configurations until we come to the smallest configurations in the message. These are composed of propositions, which we now consider.

10.2.4 Propositions

A proposition represents the simplest possible thought pattern, the weaving together of several concepts in a purposive way. We saw earlier (section 5.6) that concepts are by nature interactive; the proposition is the basic building block of communication created by their joint activity.

Concepts do not combine in a haphazard way to form propositions. The pattern of a proposition always has a prominent element, either an event concept or a thing concept. Other concepts are closely associated with these in a variety of relationships to form different propositional patterns, for example, that of a person performing an activity, or of a thing with a quality attributed to it.

Like all units of meaning, propositions have both reference and purpose. The reference, what the proposition is about, derives directly from its constituent concepts. The concepts themselves are the product of experience (section 5.4). Hence the controlling factor preventing haphazard collections of concepts is experience. The propositional patterns mentioned in the last paragraph play their part, but a much more important factor is the experience from which the concepts have developed: if two things or events are not associated in life, then there is no magnetism to hold the corresponding concepts together. In fact we cannot force them together; they repel each other. There is no proposition underlying the surface form “My friend is the hypotenuse of a nationalistic thundercloud.” It can be said, and the relationships are potentially acceptable, but it cannot be thought. Coherence among concepts depends primarily upon association in experience.

But even a coherent pattern of concepts does not constitute a proposition unless it is organised with purposive significance. The concepts buy, potatoes, and Mary do not constitute a proposition—they do not communicate anything because they are not organised purposefully. Organised so as to express import, these concepts could give us, among others, the surface realisations “Did Mary buy any potatoes?” and “Buy some potatoes, Mary.” Organised so as to express a supporting function, they could give us “the potatoes Mary bought” or “if Mary buys potatoes.” A proposition always has a significant communicative function.

10.2.5 Theory note: different uses of the term “proposition”

The term “proposition,” as we have been using it, signifies a unit of meaning which is cognitively based, and which is operative in the context of a specific message. But the term has been used by other linguists in quite different ways.

From any viewpoint, a proposition is an abstraction. Some derive it directly from a certain arrangement of words. Those who define propositions in this way tend to assume that each noun or verb in the surface-structure clause has a single concept attached to it at the level of meaning. So defined, it is a meaning unit intercepted, as it were, when very close to surface structure, when the speaker’s meaning has very nearly “gelled” into words. Obviously this approach is language-specific: the same meaning might be expressed by very different word-combinations in another language. But as we use the term, propositions are cognitively based, not word based; one proposition underlies the various expressions in different languages. The concepts, therefore, which combine to form the proposition, are at a cognitive level which relates to experiences, not to words. Words follow later.

For some, the proposition is an isolate, an abstraction from a given combination of words regardless of the occasion on which they might be used. The proposition, in this case, does not represent a speaker’s meaning, nor does it play a part in a larger whole: it is a logical unit, on which are performed such operations as negation or hypothesis; it has no communicative function. Often associated with this approach is the restriction of propositions to assertions. Thus a sentence has an underlying proposition only if it has a truth value, only if it can be true or false. Utterances like “Please put the kettle on for tea” or “I could do with a nice cup of tea” have no underlying proposition according to this view, because they do not have a truth-value. This restriction has been singularly unhelpful for communication studies, which have to account for a multiplicity of communicative purposes.

In our view, a proposition represents the interweaving of concepts in the speaker’s mind as he relates them together for some communicative purpose, whether that purpose be assertive, directive, expressive, or supportive. If the communication is successful (as most are), then the same proposition represents the way in which concepts interrelate in the hearer’s mind as he listens.

10.3 The message and its network of relations

10.3.1 The cognitive sources of relations

Nothing makes sense in our minds unless we can relate it to our existing mind content, both foregrounded and stored. As we listen to a message, each proposition relates to the immediately preceding verbal context and to the context provided by the whole of the message up to that point. But it relates in this way only because the message sender has presented it as so related. He, in his turn, has presented propositions in this way only because that is the way they are related in his own mind. In other words, a message sender is communicating not a string of propositions but an interrelated network of propositions—the relations, just as much as the propositions, are part of the mind-content that he is communicating.

At least two quite different kinds of relations are constantly operative between meaning units, whatever their size. These have their origins, as we might by now have come to anticipate, in the referential and purposive aspects of the message respectively. The referential relations between units tell us how these particular bits of message content are related to each other in the real world (or in the envisaged world in the case of a fable or novel). The purposive relations between units tell us how these same bits of message content relate to the speaker’s purpose, what parts they respectively play in fulfilling the purpose of the message.

These relations and others will be considered in Part 2. In this chapter a broader approach is taken, providing an overview of how relations shape longer messages.

Just as prominence was seen to pervade the hierarchy of nesting units (section 10.2.2), it is correspondingly pervasive in the relational network that interrelates those units. When two units are related to each other, one of the two is normally relationally dominant, that is, it is more prominent than the other because of the relationship between them. Thus an effect is normally more prominent than its cause, an appeal than the grounds on which it is made.

Such interweaving of more prominent and less prominent elements is characteristic of human communication. We therefore call it “natural prominence,” to distinguish it from the special prominence to be discussed later (section 10.6).

10.3.2 Referential relations

Referential relations are those which mirror real-world relationships. They play an essential part in communications, linking both propositions and configurations so that they convey facts correctly. If, for example, I am communicating the two facts that Mike laughed and that Anna blushed, my message is confused and ambiguous unless I make clear the relation between these two events. Either Mike laughed at Anna because she blushed, or else Anna blushed because Mike laughed at her. Any accurate report must indicate to the hearer which of these two sequences actually took place.

The commonest of the referential relations are those of time and causality. Events occur either sequentially or simultaneously on a time scale. If I say, “I came home and had a meal,” I mean that those two events occurred in that order, chronologically. I could, of course, make the relation more explicit by saying, “After I came home, I had a meal,” or “I came home and then had a meal.” But these more explicit versions are a much less natural way of realising the same underlying meaning than the straight conjoining “and.”

Causal relations are similarly asserted as being true of the real world. If I say, “I was late because the bus broke down,” I mean that the breakdown of the bus did objectively cause my lateness, not simply that I personally see those events that way. I may, of course, verbalise my meaning in different ways. I may say, “The bus broke down, so I was late,” or “I was late—the bus broke down.” But in each case, I am saying, and a normal English addressee would understand me to be saying, that the bus broke down and this was the cause of my being late.

Chronological and causal relations operate between units at higher levels also. For example, in a straightforward novel tracing a central character through a series of adventures, each chapter normally follows the preceding one in chronological succession. The events of chapter 1 occur at an earlier point in time than those of chapter 2, and so on. Causal relations also hold between high-level units. In a geography textbook, a paragraph describing a volcanic eruption may be followed by several paragraphs describing its effects; a causal relationship is being asserted between the eruption and the following events.

10.3.3 Purposive relations

As we have seen, referential relations interrelate the propositions of the message so that they make sense. Purposive relations, on the other hand, interrelate that same material so that it aims in a purposeful direction. If a message is well organised purposively, then at any given point the addressee will know exactly the state of the message and will have a fair idea also of the direction which the rest of the message is going to take. He may not know exactly what the speaker is going to ask him to do, but he knows that the message so far has been building up to some request, and he is expecting it. He may not know what the solution is going to be to the problem the message sender has posed, but he knows that there will be a solution and is waiting for it.

The purposive relations provide a framework for the message, a sort of conceptual canopy over all the details, making the significance of each part clear. We are calling this overall purposive framework the schema of the message. This is not just a matter of theory or technical jargon: we all look for a schema, for significant patternings, in the messages we receive every day. We say, “Get to the point, go on!” to someone who is presenting a rambling message and making little progress. Once a problem has been presented, in fiction or fact, we are impatient to know the solution; the author of a detective novel has to delay until the last few pages the revelation of who actually committed the crime because to the reader the purposive patterning ends at that point—nothing else is of interest. We are strongly aware of purposive patternings even though we may not be able to label them. “Schema” is just a technical name for a cognitive fact.

Messages take different shapes according to the purpose of the communicator. The three imports of communication result in different kinds of schema chosen by the message sender according to the effect he wants to have on the addressee, the way he hopes to achieve that effect, and the willingness or unwillingness of the addressee to accept the message.

For instance, if the sender of a directive message wants the addressee to do something but the addressee is unwilling, the message sender has to address himself to the source of that unwillingness. If the addressee does not consider the project worthwhile, the message sender presents a favourable picture of the project; if the addressee fears the consequences of the project, the message sender seeks to allay those fears; if the addressee is simply not interested, the message sender seeks to motivate him. All these and a variety of other factors have their effect on the shaping of the message, whether it takes the form of a recipe, an advertisement, or a summons.

Expressive messages are similarly shaped by the situation and outlook of the message sender and the addressee. If the speaker or writer is expressing emotion, his message will probably be shaped by associative relations (using comparisons and examples) rather than by logical ones; he will appeal to the feelings rather than to the reason of the recipients. If he is expressing an evaluation, he will be conscious of whether the addressee shares that evaluation or not; if not, he will try to bring the addressee round to his own viewpoint either by attacking the addressee’s position or vindicating his own. These factors also give rise to identifiable message patterns.

The situation with informational messages is more complex. Informational messages differ markedly according to whether the addressee wants the information or not. In most cases, an addressee who does not want the information will simply ignore the message. He may put the book back on the shelf, turn off the television, or cancel his magazine subscription, but he will not waste time and effort processing information he does not want. Authors of general messages, therefore, go to considerable lengths to arouse and maintain the interest of their audience. Human beings are interested in things that resolve problems, fulfil purposes, or solve mysteries, so novels and newspapers alike present their information under schema patterns that exploit these natural interests.

If, on the other hand, the addressee wants or needs the information being conveyed, then the communicator usually makes very little attempt to be interesting and concentrates on providing the information required in a suitably accessible form. Thus a railway timetable or a handbook on bird identification is geared not to the author’s purposes, but to the user’s needs. It has a referential structure, not a purposive one, and the controlling factors are quality of information (relevance and accuracy) and ease of access.

10.3.4 How relations are signalled

Relations may be expressed in surface structure by either explicit or inexact signals, or by no overt signal at all. “I had a headache so I went to bed early” and “I went to bed early because I had a headache” use the explicit signals “so” and “because.” The same meaning can be conveyed using inexact signals as in “I had a headache and went to bed early” and “I went to bed early with a headache.” Both “and” and “with” are signals which in other contexts signal different relations, but although the signal is in itself ambiguous the causal relation in both examples is clear. Another way of conveying the same meaning is to say, “I went to bed early; I had a headache.” Here the surface representation of the causal relation is zero.

When there is either no signal or an inexact signal of the underlying relation, how does the hearer know what relation is meant? There is only one possible answer: the signal is found in the content of the propositions themselves. The frequent causal association between having a headache and going to bed early is sufficient to signal causality to the hearer without an explicit connective being required.

Note that the conceptual content of the propositions relates to the world of experience. If, at around nine in the evening, I say to my son, “Go upstairs straight away, have your bath, and go to bed,” then the three propositions underlying my utterance are undoubtedly related in chronological succession; I intend the events to be carried out in a specific order. However, I mean more than that: I mean that they are to be carried out successively without any long gaps or intervening events between them. The zero between the first two propositions and the “and” between the second and third both mean thereupon without delay, and my son knows this. If I later discover that he has gone upstairs at 9:05, had his bath at 9:45, and gone to bed at 10:30, I certainly do not consider that he has obeyed my instructions, nor would he claim to have done so. The intended relation was clearly understood by us both, although zero and “and” are highly ambiguous connectives. It is the world of shared experience that brings the three events together in the mind as being in fairly close succession.

Now consider another example with a different time scale. If I say to my husband, “I got your suit from the cleaners today, and mended the pocket, and hung it in the wardrobe,” I am not implying in any way that the relation of chronological succession includes a built-in factor of without delay, without any intervening events. Yet the grammatical structure is very close to that in the going-to-bed example. There is one explicit signal that two different time scales are in operation: the going-to-bed example mentions “straightaway,” while the suit example mentions “today.” The time adverb provides a time scale for the interpretation of the events that follow. This, however, is of much less significance than the clues from content and context. Having a bath and going to bed generally follow each other in fairly close succession but it would be a rare day indeed in which I had a shopping expedition, did my mending, and tidied up without a whole range of other events intervening. My husband’s knowledge of my daily programme enables him to interpret my utterance exactly as I meant it, that some time during the day I performed all these activities in the order stated.

Purists would undoubtedly like to have every meaning relation unambiguously signalled by explicit markers in surface structure. But speakers of languages are not purists; languages are communication codes, not mathematical ones. In fact, communications that aim at the greatest accuracy, such as legal and scientific documents, are often the hardest to read. Whether, in any given language, the inventory of relational terms is large or small, content and context are the primary clues to relational meaning. There is no substitute for familiarity with the contextual world of the message.

10.3.5 Relating the relations

Referential relations trace back to the real world and establish consistency with that world; purposive (schema) relations relate back to the purposes of the message sender. How do these different relations operate in messages with respect to each other? Propositions have been shown to relate to each other referentially, and longer messages exhibit schema patterns developed purposively. It would therefore be theoretically satisfying if we could divide messages up in this way, with the different kinds of relations operating mutually exclusively at different hierarchical levels.

At first glance this does seem to be what happens in longer messages. The facts of a story, for instance, unfold proposition by proposition, establishing its referential base; the thrust of the story, carrying out the communicator’s purpose, is developed on a larger canvas.

But first glances can be misleading. It is true that in the larger units of the message the purposive element seems dominant: whole chapters will have the function of establishing the hero’s task, for instance. Yet these same chapters are also related so as to make referential sense—they are presented as chronologically and causally connected, as well as fulfilling a purposive role. The same dual function is found at lower levels. An everyday utterance like “If you run out of sugar, you’ll need to borrow some from next door” has a simple condition-consequence relation referentially and, simultaneously, a problem-resolution relationship schematically.

In fact, a message sender is always doing two things simultaneously: he is always presenting the referential content as making sense, and he is at the same time also presenting the same content as fulfilling his purposes. Both operations are always going on simultaneously in any message.

But our picture of the relational network of messages is not yet complete: a third kind of relation is also operative. Some elements in a message do not belong to its main purposive content, but rather serve to present that message in a particular way. Messages with the same content and purpose can be presented very differently to different recipients, whether it be vividly with many illustrations, simply with explanations, or in a leisurely way with descriptive detail. The relations linking such supporting material to the core are what we are calling “presentational relations.”

Thus three kinds of relations are involved simultaneously in messages, each with a distinct function. Purposive relations establish the schematic elements; referential relations link the content at all levels in a way that makes sense; presentational relations establish supporting elements with a particular audience in view.

For any given unit, one kind of relation is frequently dominant in establishing its function in the message. (Many explanations, for instance, exhibit the referential relation of causality, but their primary function is clearly presentational.) Nevertheless all three kinds of relations are always operative simultaneously, for the message sender never loses sight of either his purpose or his audience. At all times he is communicating purposively, directing the message towards its recipients, and relating it to the real world in a coherent way.

10.4 The prosodies of the message

Units-in-hierarchical-relation form the structural core of any message, but they do not account for all the meaning features involved. There are a variety of meaning features which do not constitute units, but which pervade extended parts of the message. We are calling these meaning features “prosodies.”

A prosody is operative in a unit, not as a smaller subunit building up its structure, but as relevant throughout. Thus, if a chapter in a story describes what happened when the hero ran away to sea, then the location “at sea” is relevant to the whole of that chapter. The writer does not need to mention it in every sentence, but it is something that is true of each sentence.

There are, in fact, many meaning features which the mind holds constant throughout all or part of a message. Time and location are common ones; referential status (real, envisaging, or imagining) is another. (I remember my frustration on one occasion when I picked up a book purporting to describe the founding of the famous research institution where my son-in-law then worked. The facts sounded coherent and convincing, but the whole presentation was so novel-like that I had uneasy suspicions and eventually cast the book aside unfinished. Uncertainty of referential status affected the whole story.) In expressive messages a particular attitude (of hostility to a suggestion, for example, or of enthusiastic approval of some activity) may pervade the entire message. Handling these as prosodies is an economical way of recognising the mental umbrella that the mind is holding over the message without there being any need to mention it frequently throughout the analysis.

A prosody, once activated in the mind of the recipient, is conceptually present and available until a change is signalled. A story set in the Scottish highlands is assumed by the recipient to continue in that location, unless some overt signal indicates a transfer to Edinburgh or New York.

It is possible, of course, for an established prosody to be realised repeatedly in surface-structure, but this is not essential. A prosody such as distant past might be signalled with every verb, or might appear initially only, signalled by a time phrase such as “Many years ago.” What is significant is not the number of occurrences, but the maintaining of a particular feature as relevant to an extended part of the message. Cognitively, that feature is present throughout the unit concerned, regardless of frequency of realisation.

Details of different kinds of prosodies will be found in chapter 11.

10.5 Monitoring features of the message

We saw, in chapter 9, that when a speaker directs his message towards a particular audience, this gives rise to supporting units in the structure of the message. But this same audience-directedness gives rise to other features which do not form a part of the interlocking hierarchy of related units.

10.5.1 Relating to the recipient’s state of knowledge

A speaker, as we saw in section 4.3.1, is always aware of whether or not the recipient already has the knowledge required for understanding the message. In longer messages, spoken or written, the same monitoring process goes on. The message sender assesses whether the necessary information is already activated, readily available, or accessible by prompting, and presents the message accordingly. (If the content of the message contains much that is new, then explanations, definitions or illustrations may be required, giving rise to the supporting structures already discussed.)

First, the message sender ensures that the right conceptual material is foregrounded, so that the message can be plugged in at the appropriate point. But this is not a static situation. As the message is presented, the foregrounded conceptual material is constantly developing and changing as new material is added. And as each new part of the message is presented, it has to be woven in to what is, at that moment, the conceptual matrix to which it relates. Each new proposition has to be related to the preceding material (not necessarily to the preceding proposition) in a way that the hearer can readily process. Most easily processed is material that repeats something already recently presented, which is signalled as known; other material may be new as far as the message is concerned, but highly accessible because it occurs in related frames or is in common use. Other material may be readily accessible because the message, as it has unfolded, has raised a strong expectation of its occurrence. Different elements of the message receive different surface-structure realisations according to the “accessibility tag” put on them through the monitoring process.

We can see, therefore, that two essential elements are involved as the message sender seeks to enable the recipient to construct in his own mind the meaning structure being communicated. First, there is the memory network which has been deliberately foregrounded, and is available as a prosody throughout: this is receiving constant extension as the message progresses. Second, there are clear signals as to exactly where in this foregrounded network the new material is to be located. Thus in a narrative, successive uses of “he” or “she” indicate that the new material relates to the old by virtue of being about the recently mentioned hero or heroine. The new facts now become part of the available information about that participant.

Such a simple example should not, however, delude us into thinking that new material necessarily plugs into the old at one point only. One point is sufficient to enable communication to take place, but often several such connecting points are supplied. If a neighbour calls at the door asking for my husband, I may reply, “Oh, he’s in the garden, painting the fence.” The point of attachment derived from the previous communicative context is “he”: the new fact being presented is about my husband. But the communication also connects immediately with my neighbour’s knowledge about gardens, and fencing, and the painting of fences. (In fact, being a neighbour, he is probably familiar with my particular garden and how it is fenced, but that is not essential. All that is essential is that his knowledge store include gardens and fencing as culturally familiar items.) The new knowledge gained by my neighbour is not attached in his mind solely to his concept of my husband: it is also attached to the garden and the fence. He might easily go home and say to his wife, “I wonder if it’s time we repainted our fence. The Callows next door have just done theirs.” In other words, he now has our fence filed in his knowledge bank as a newly painted fence. Any item of knowledge foregrounded in the communicative process is likely to be augmented in some way in the course of the communication simply because the communication provides new mental link-ups, and those link-ups are multidirectional.

10.5.2 Relating to message structure: signposts

A message sender tries to build up in the recipient’s mind a replica of the message already existing in his own. This conceptual replica must have all its parts rightly related to each other, so the speaker makes efforts to ensure that each new part fits readily into the partially completed structure already in place. To do this, he frequently places signposts marking message progression at appropriate points, especially at the beginning of new schema units. Such tracking devices are most needed, and most used, in logical, expressive or persuasive messages, since these lack the references to time and location that mark progression in time-based messages.

The signpost may consist of simple enumeration (“First . . . .secondly . . . thirdly.”) It may signal a change in the logical development of the message: “On the other hand,” “alternatively,” “we may conclude.” The signal is not necessarily short: “We now come to the crucial point in our argument” and “Let us consider the problem from a different angle” are also signposts. Such signals contribute no fresh referential material to the message; they stand aside from it as a sort of commentary to assist the recipient.

Signposting comments, therefore, do not form part of the core material of the message. They should not be considered as part of the proposition to which they are apparently related by their surface-structure position; they may well relate primarily to a paragraph configuration or even larger unit.

It should be noted that some messages have a superstructure which similarly stands outside the message proper. Books have forewords and introductions; letters have salutations and greetings. These set the message in the larger social context and relate both the message itself and the message sender to the addressee, but they do not form an integral part of the message.

10.6 Special prominence

Often a speaker or writer focuses special attention on a particular element in the message. He may highlight a particular character or event, or present some fact as surprising or emotionally charged. Such prominence is not, like natural prominence (section 10.3.1), part of the warp and woof of the message. It is an extra, an option which the message sender may employ or not, as he wishes.

While natural prominence is realised in surface structure by the regular constructions of the language, special prominence is realised by such devices as intensifiers, exclamations, emotive vocabulary, and unusual constructions. Anything unanticipated always carries with it a degree of prominence, hence special prominence is often conveyed by unexpected lexical and grammatical choices. Writers frequently build up in the recipients a certain expectation, only to conclude with a totally unexpected outcome, as is often the case in jokes. Signals of special prominence will be considered in more detail in chapter 11.

10.7 Looking ahead to Part 2

We now have a picture of the essential nature of any message, regardless of the language in which it is expressed. In Part 2 we will go on to study in detail how to analyse surface-structure discourses in terms of their underlying message. Analysis is different from decoding. A native speaker decodes a message more or less instantaneously as he receives it. He does not need to make deductions or analyse it in order to understand it. The analyst, on the other hand, starts where the decoder leaves off. The whole message is available to him simultaneously, and its meaning is understood. The analyst’s work is to reveal the underlying structure of that meaning and the skill with which the message sender has realised it, using the available devices of the language.

From this point on we will concentrate on spoken or written monologue, excluding conversational messages from our study, albeit with regret. In fact, much that we have already studied, and much that will be studied in Part 2, will be found relevant to the analysis of conversations. But a conversation does not consist of one message, but of an interplay of messages from different sources. These emanate from at least two heads, two minds, two personalities, instead of one. Moreover, they are much less purposeful than monologue messages, and more loosely constructed. It seems sensible, therefore, to leave the study of such a complex type of communication until our study of more straightforward ones is further advanced.

Suggestions for further study

1. Cognitive characteristics of messages (section 10:1)

The theory underlying nesting units (that of combining a number of small items into a larger unit for ease of processing) is propounded, from a psychologist’s viewpoint, by Miller (1956). See also Gregory, ed., 1987:148 (article on “Chunking”). The top-down approach to analysis is discussed in Baker, 1992:6; Brown & Yule, 1983:234–35; Snell-Hornby, 1988:35–36, 69. There is extensive discussion of the hearer’s constructed mental model in Johnson-Laird, 1983; see especially pages 244–49. See also van Dijk, 1972:133; 1981:15–16; Gernsbacher, 1990:1–2, 227.

2. Topical prominence and special prominence (sections 10.2.2 and 10.6)

The term “topic” has been used in a variety of ways: see van Dijk, 1981:21–22, 187–90. Students wishing to study high-level (discourse) topic should consult Brown & Yule, 1983:ix, 68–124; Givón, 1983:7–9; 1990:899–914.

A detailed discussion of special prominence is found in section 11.5. For a summary of natural and special (marked) prominence, see Callow & Callow, 1992:11, 14, 32. For an example of visual prominence, see ibid. 22, 34–35.

3. Propositions (sections 10.2.4 and 10.2.5)

For a discussion of different uses of the term “proposition,” see Brown & Yule, 1983:107–16; Johnson, 1987:3–4. Johnson-Laird (1983) discusses the nature of propositional representations on pp. 243–44. Discourse linguists have in general avoided using the term, but Chafe (in Chafe (ed.) 1980) speaks of “idea units” on pp. 13–15 and “mini-chunks” of consciousness on pp. 277–80, in ways very relevant to our present studies. Nuyts, 1990:277–79 discusses concepts and “states of affairs” in a cognitive framework similar to the one presented here. The term “proposition” is used in this volume as being a familiar, one-word technical term, but it is defined cognitively, see chapter 18. For worked examples of propositional analysis, see chapters 19 and 20, also Callow & Callow, 1992:18–20.

4. Message schemas (section 10.3.3)

The term “schema” has been widely used with reference to concepts, preconceptual states, and ways of organising knowledge. See Brown & Yule, 1983:247–50; Chafe (ed.), 1980:12; Johnson-Laird, 1983:189. For a detailed study of the use of the term at conceptual and preconceptual levels, see Johnson, 1987:xix, 2, 19–30. He describes (image) schemata as “abstract patterns” (ibid.:2) and “organising structures” (ibid.:20) which are nonpropositional, recurring, flexible, and dynamic. Such a description applies perfectly, at the level of message structure, to the patterns given the label “schema” in section 10.3.3.

These patterns do not only structure messages. They facilitate both prediction of the path a message will follow (thus aiding comprehension) and later recall of the message when details are forgotten—see van Dijk, 1972:133 and Mandler, 1984:18.

There is a helpful discussion of different types of message schema in Longacre 1992:110–11. Narrative schemas have been most widely explored: see Mandler, 1984:passim; also Bell, 1991:147–54; Brown & Yule, 1983:120; Greene, 1986:43–49. Varied analyses of a volitional text are found in Mann & Thompson, eds., 1992. Those discussing or applying schemas in our sense are Callow & Callow (1992:10–11, 24–29); Jordan (1992:192–94); Longacre (1992:111–12); Martin (1992:360–61). For plots of character (not discussed in this volume), see Bruner, 1986:14–21.

PART TWO

The Analysis of Messages

Working with Texts in Part Two

Leaving the study of man the message sender, we now turn our attention to the messages themselves with the purpose of discerning and displaying their structure. Although sample texts will be in English for the sake of clarity and comprehensibility, the categories we establish to analyse messages are universal, not restricted to specific surface forms.

Various illustrative texts are presented at appropriate points in Part 2. The same texts also appear in the Appendix, arranged in alphabetical order according to title. (Abbreviations of these titles will be used in the chapters that follow: the text entitled Look Out for the Badger will be referred to as the Badger text and so on.) The presentation of these texts departs from the original versions only in that they are divided for ease of reference into numbered segments. Some of the texts, in part or whole, will be analysed in detail. A student who takes time to work through the analysed texts should then be able to take up his pen and launch out on his own.

No Suggestions for further study are provided in Part Two: the assignment for each chapter is to apply it to texts. However, students who wish to sample a variety of approaches to discourse/text analysis will find stimulating insights in the following: Brown & Yule 1983; Fawcett 1980; Grimes 1975; Hoey 1983; Longacre 1983; Mann & Thompson, eds. 1992; Pike & Pike 1983; Schiffrin 1994; Stubbs 1983; Toolan 1991; van Dijk 1981.

The student is urged from the outset to apply the model to a language other than English, provided that he is reasonably at home in it. The ability to discern and analyse the meaning structure of texts is developed, not by discussing theory, but by applying it. There is no substitute for constant exposure to language data.

11

THE MESSAGE AS A UNIT

11.1 Approaching the analysis of texts

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11.5 Special prominence

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11.5.4 Special prominence signalled visually

11.5.5 Degrees of special prominence

11.1 Approaching the analysis of texts

We turn now to the practicalities of analysing texts. We will be following the framework outlined in chapter 10, viewing a text not simply as a coherent sample of language, but as a purposive communication, constructed by a writer in order to convey his intended message as effectively as possible to his intended readers. Any text is the concrete, language-specific embodiment of the writer’s underlying message; we analyse texts in order to reveal messages.

The texts themselves will provide the clues we need in this message-revealing process. The writer, by a verb-ending here and a lexical choice there, is constantly and carefully encoding the message he wishes to convey. We must always be on the lookout for such clues. In no way are we engaged in an imaginative reconstruction of the writer’s intentions: our purpose is to discover what the writer meant, not what he might possibly have meant. Hence we are always subject to the evidence.

In practice, giving priority to the evidence provides us with two guidelines as we approach our analysis. The first is negative: no matter how attractive the interpretation we are pursuing, if we discover evidence which conflicts with it, then it is the interpretation which must be abandoned or modified. We are not at liberty to brush evidence beneath the carpet. The second is positive: we can be greatly encouraged in any analysis by the discovery of mutually supporting pieces of evidence from a variety of sources. We should be expecting the referential content to corroborate the schema relations and the prominence patterns, and so on. We will rarely be disappointed.

To some extent, then, we must be prepared to work at a variety of levels simultaneously, simply because the clues are found at all levels simultaneously. Nevertheless (as was made clear in section 10.1) this is essentially a top-down approach. The writer’s overall purpose determines his lower-level decisions throughout. Hence as analysts we will seek to establish that overall purpose first, using lower-level signals as clues. Only when we have established the main thrust of the message and the structures that convey it will we move on to consider low-level units in detail.

There is, however, considerable groundwork to be covered before we are in a position to establish those essential, high-level purposes and structures. Whatever text we are studying, it will have its roots in some culture, some literary tradition, some immediate situation. Such factors will permeate the whole text from beginning to end. There will, moreover, be extensive prosodies (see section 10.4) that recur throughout and that cannot be considered to belong to any one unit of the text more than another. All these pervasive factors provide us with a rich background of understanding when we come later to the detailed study of message development.

In this chapter, therefore, we will consider the prosodies of the message. We will organise our study around prosodies of three different kinds according to their sources. In addition, we will devote a separate section to further study of special prominence (treated earlier in section 10.6), since this also is a feature which operates independently of the referential-purposive structures of the message.

The prosodies of a message arise from three sources: the situational context of the message, the referential material of the message, and the knowledge and attitudes of the communicator and recipient. When analysing a short text, it is sufficient just to list the prosodies noted, but with longer material, it is helpful to include the prosodies in the display of the meaning structure. The core material is represented by the propositions (or larger units) and their relations: methods for displaying these are shown at the end of chapters 16,17 and 19. Alongside such a display, it can be helpful to show any prosodic elements in an additional column, providing the analyst with space to comment on prosodic material which is relevant to the analysis at that point.

Some of the prosodies that we will consider are obligatory: every text must be written from some viewpoint, for instance, and have a certain referential status. Other prosodies are optional: the attitudes and emotions of the writer may or may not affect the surface-structure forms chosen. Some texts exhibit very few optional prosodic characteristics, and it is wasted labour to try to discern them where they are absent. We are providing suggestions for analysis, not a blueprint.

11.2 Situational prosodies: the context of the message

11.2.1 The sociocultural context

The culture of the message sender pervades the message from beginning to end. Every sentence, every clause, is permeated with it. This is partly because the mind of the message sender is rooted in his own culture, in all its thought patterns and values, partly also because the words he uses to express his message are likewise rooted in the same culture.

There is a vast background of experience which members of a social unit hold in common. Family relationships, weather patterns, common household objects and utensils, common behaviour patterns—these and countless other factors in daily life are shared by a community. Thus “brother” may mean male child of my own parents in English, but the nearest corresponding term in many African languages means older/younger male child of my father or of his male siblings. But more important than the exact reference is the accompanying experiential detail: how one brother relates to another in terms of authority, affection, the sharing of responsibilities, the sharing of wealth, their respective rights and duties, their ceremonial relationships (e.g. at weddings and funerals). All this, and not simply the reference, differentiates English “brother” from Kasem “older/younger brother/cousin.” In any message, the meaning a word carries is its meaning in that society, and the shared background awareness of how that society functions is an important sociocultural prosody of the message.

Here we are attempting to focus on those factors in the culture which are particularly relevant to the text under analysis, especially those which in some way constrain either the form or the interpretation of the text. If the text is contemporary, many of these factors will be intuitively obvious. But if the text is from another time and another culture, some effort will be required in order to come to grips with the culture within which the author was operating. (No one disputes that if an author wants to write about another culture than his own he needs to do much meticulous research; the fact that research is also needed in order to understand what is written is much less readily recognised.)

We will here consider how sociocultural factors affect the purpose conveyed by the text, the form of the text, and the communicative strategies employed in the text.

Some factors provided by the sociocultural context are purposive. A fictional message may be presented in one culture solely in order to amuse, in another, primarily to inculcate values. (Whether the former can succeed in amusing without simultaneously inculcating values is a moot point—but here we are considering solely the message sender’s purposes, not the unintended effects of his message.)

Since the values to be inculcated vary to some extent from one society to another, the way in which messages are interpreted will vary somewhat also. I remember on one occasion being quite perplexed when a Kazakh lady studying her own literature translated a folktale for me. To me it seemed quite unfinished: an old man struggling through the forest with a load of wood groaned that life was intolerable, death would be preferable. Death promptly appeared at his side, and the man, terrified, hastily said that all he wanted was a little help carrying his load. My Kazakh friend was quite surprised when I asked, “So what happened? Did he die or not?” To her that was not the point: the story was intended to inculcate a moral, that even a hard life is worth living. The punchline lay in the old man’s tacit admission of this when he speedily (and to a Kazakh audience amusingly) changed his mind. My culturally moulded expectations had been wrong.

Each culture has its appropriate structures for communicating different classes of purpose. One structure is appropriate to a moral, another to a joke, another to an item of news. We need to be able to match each structure with its purpose.

Sociocultural factors also affect the form of the text. Each culture has acceptable literary (or spoken) forms for different kinds of communication. The formality or informality of the social situation affects the style with respect to both grammar and lexical choices. Compare, for instance, the number of abstract nouns in the Daffodil Leaves and Multiple Sclerosis texts, or the number of subordinate clauses in the Barefoot and Radon texts. Similarly, sociocultural factors will determine in what dialect a message is conveyed. This is particularly important when a language exists in a “high” and a “low” form. Sometimes only the “high” form is considered appropriate for certain contexts, e.g., education or religion, although the “low” form may be much better understood.

Lastly, sociocultural factors affect the communicative strategies employed in the text—what is considered relevant and what is not; under what circumstances literal truth is or is not expected; what must be explicitly stated and what may be left for the readers to fill in. These strategies will vary within one community according to the type of message and the assumed audience. English readers, for example, will tolerate a degree of repetition in children’s stories which they would not tolerate in other literature.

11.2.2 The immediate situational context

The immediate situation of the message sender (see section 4.1) is of great importance in informal face-to-face communication, but of much less importance in written messages, since the audience does not share that context. It is also of less importance in formal spoken messages, since in these the speaker takes a relatively neutral stance.

There are, however, several ways in which the immediate situation of the message sender affects the message substantially, even in formal and written communications.

First, it affects the message referentially. The message sender usually establishes the moment of communication as “now,” and relates all time references backwards or forwards from that reference point. Thus a future reference in a newspaper means future at the date of writing. Similarly, “here” is the place of writing. (Whether it is the country, town, or building where the writer is located will be made clear by factors in the co-text.) If here and now are established as prosodies of the message, then there is no need to make the reference specific on every occasion of use.

The immediate situation of the message sender also affects the person orientation of the message. The message sender’s relationship to the addressees affects the way he expresses himself throughout. It not only determines who is designated as “I” and “you,” which is a purely referential matter, but it also affects the degree of formality employed, the amount of shared knowledge assumed, the common purposes and values tacitly accepted, and so on.

A further factor, probably affected by both the cultural and the immediate situations, is the degree of detail considered appropriate throughout the message, and along with this the degree of accuracy. A botanist and a photographer will describe a flower differently; a travel agent will not describe a stretch of coastline in the same terms as a geographer.

It is important to realise that these various situational factors are not something tacked on to the message as an external feature, an addendum. Rather, they permeate the message in its entirety and are indissolubly connected with its most central features—its themes, its nuclear elements, its import-bearing material.

11.2.3 The situational framework

Some messages are, as it were, framed, or enclosed, within communicative material which relates only loosely to the content of the message, but very closely to the situational context. Thus, a speech, a sermon, or a letter may begin with communicative material which might equally well introduce more or less any message from that particular speaker or writer to those addressees.

This situationally derived material usually has the purpose of building up rapport between message sender and addressees, confirming the relationship in which they stand to each other and acting as an inducement to the addressees to pay attention to the message. The purpose of the framework therefore is to establish relationships and to promote the acceptance of the message, regardless of what purpose the message itself may have.

Message framework is structurally distinct from the message proper. When we use the term “message” without qualification, we are excluding any framework elements: these need separate analysis. However, inasmuch as it is applicable to the message as a whole, and relevant throughout, the framework can be considered prosodic, although surfacing overtly only at the boundaries.

11.3 Referential prosodies: the content of the message

Prosodies of content provide defining parameters for the referential material of messages. Here we must be very general, for we are attempting to cover all possible referential material from Brer Rabbit to the theory of relativity. We will set up five parameters or prosodies in terms of which the essential characteristics of the referential material of any kind of message may be defined. A sixth referential prosody, motif, will also be considered, but this differs from the others in both its realisation and its function.

11.3.1 The referential status of the message

The activity of conceptualising is the activity of referring; we always think and communicate referringly. I am referring just as much when I say, “Please leave the room,” as when I say, “He has left the room.” All our thinking and communicating is outward-directed, referential. But our references do not all relate to the real-world-out-there in the same way: there are three different ways of thinking referringly (see section 5:7.3). When we assert content, we believe it to be objectively true. When we envisage it, we do not know if it is true or not, but we know that it could be true, it is consistent with the world as we know it. We can also refer imaginingly, knowing that our referential content could never be true, and nobody thinks it is true, but we are establishing a world of imagination, and it is true in that world.

Generally speaking, an entire message has the same referential status; a change of status in mid-message marks a new unit of some sort. Thus reports of all kinds have assertive status, relating to the real world; exhortations, proposals, and hypotheses have envisaging status; fairy stories, fantasies and fables have imaginative status. Referential status is a prosody that permeates the whole message.

11.3.2 The concreteness of the referents

Some messages are about very concrete referents, such as people in the news, particular social events, or happenings with specific time-space coordinates such as an earthquake, a birth, or an epidemic. (Note that the time coordinate can be an extensive one; it need not be just a moment in time.)

Other messages are less concrete: they relate to people and events, but in a generalised way, not pinpointed in time and space. Thus the message may be about a way of treating patients with a certain disease, or about how to rescue an economy from inflation, or about the factors which led to the downfall of a particular government. Such messages tend to be about ideas, rather than about identifiable people and objects.

Still other messages are about abstractions—about mass and gravity, about values, about the nature of matter, or thought, or obligation, or joy.

11.3.3 The milieu of the referential material

The milieu of a communication is its locational or notional setting. A story set in Australia has a very different atmosphere from one set in a London suburb. A magazine featuring characters who shop in Sauchiehall Street or live on the shores of Loch Ness has an instant appeal to lovers of Scotland, an appeal that would be lost on English readers for whom prestige shops are found in Oxford Street, and prestige homes in Cotswold villages. The plot might be much the same in each case, but the difference in setting pervades the whole and sets its distinctive mark on each message.

From his own familiar world each writer selects a subworld as the milieu of his communication. In technical material that subworld may consist of the laboratory or the law courts. In many personal communications it is the writer’s home, his business, his family. In novels the subworld may be a real one, such as Chicago or the English Lake District, or it may be a purely imaginary one constructed by the writer, such as Tolkien’s Middle Earth. The analyst needs to familiarise himself as much as possible with the subworld of his text.

11.3.4 The characteristic relations of the referential material

As established in chapter 10, there can be neither meaning nor understanding unless the referential material is joined in coherent relations. These relations join the propositions of a message into a network that makes sense. But different messages have different kinds of relations making up their network. Some have the propositions joined in chronological relations, others in logical relations, still others in necessary relations (as in mathematics) or in associative relations (as in descriptions).

These relations, which will be studied in detail in chapters 16 and 17, concern us here only to note that they cannot occur randomly, all mixed up. A message is characterised by relations which bear a family likeness to each other, and the message develops along the parameter defined by those relations: it progresses in time, in logical development, or occasionally along some referential parameter, (e.g., spatial, as in giving someone directions). An important prosody of messages, therefore, is the parameter along which they develop. If nontypical relations occur, they will be found to be marking some departure from the main theme of the message.

11.3.5 The pace of the message

Any message has to be presented linearly, and we have now seen in addition that it is presented along some characteristic parameter, such as time or reasoning. The pace of the message is something like a metronomic beat or measure, and is determined by how much detail is presented along that chosen parameter.

This is easiest to follow if we consider the time parameter. Two events may be reported in succession, but did they occur two years apart, or two seconds, or somewhere in between? A message that reports many detailed successive events with very short time lapses has a quick pace. A message that reports a few selected events, either prolonged over time or with long time lapses between, has a slow pace.

Frequently a message will alternate between a quick pace, zooming in on detail, and slower stretches where the writer steps back to present the referential material in more general terms. The following excerpt from C. S. Lewis is taken from two successive paragraphs, the first illustrating a quick pace of narration, the second much slower.

The sail swelled out, the tug cast off and began rowing back, the first real wave ran up under the Dawn Treader’s prow, and she was a live ship again. The men off duty went below, Drinian took the first watch on the poop, and she turned her head eastward round the south of Avra.

The next few days were delightful. Lucy thought she was the most fortunate girl in the world, as she woke each morning to see the reflections of the sunlit water dancing on the ceiling of her cabin . . . (1952:55).

The transition from the relatively fast action of the ship’s departure to the slower pace of the voyage itself is marked by the time phrase “the next few days,” which indicates a shift of pace from successive, punctiliar events to more prolonged time spans. Such a change of pace frequently signals, as here, the start of a new unit. This is confirmed by the occurrence of “each morning” in the next sentence.

Change of pace is less easily discerned in messages presented along a logical or associative parameter. An example may be found in the Barefoot text, segments 6, 7 and 14–16, which stand back from the specific details of the referential material (“Bolivia . . . Brazil . . . Nigeria,” etc.) and comment on it much more generically (“Over one third of humanity,” “run by local people,” etc.).

11.3.6 Motif

The motif differs from the preceding five prosodies in that it is intermittent. The term is used of some noncentral object or event mentioned at intervals throughout the message. It does not occur at crucial points or in any special kind of unit: it simply provides part of the “atmosphere” of the message and constitutes a unifying factor relating its different parts.

In Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings, for instance, the smoking of pipe-weed by the hobbits could be considered a motif. The plot would be totally unaffected if all mention of pipe-weed were omitted, but we would have lost something. A hobbit puffing at his pipe is somehow presented as an attractive creature with whom the reader can empathise. And the fact that he continues puffing throughout the story highlights the ordinariness of the creatures involved in such high drama.

11.4 Person-related prosodies

Important prosodies have their source in the way in which the message sender relates to the content of his own message. Prosodies also arise when, as a result of monitoring, he relates that same content to the recipient. Sender-related prosodies will be treated in section 11.4.1 and recipient-related prosodies in section 11.4.2.

11.4.1 Sender-related prosodies

11.4.1.1 Viewpoint

There are three kinds of viewpoint. In a message presented from the first-person viewpoint, the communicator is speaking or writing in his own person, presenting his own thoughts and opinions. The message sender is “I” and the referential material is derived from what he himself has been thinking.

The second kind of viewpoint is the neutral viewpoint: the message sender has as it were withdrawn from the scene. No “I” is mentioned. This occurs in messages of quite different types—fictional materials and scientific works for example. Fiction claims no reality at all, and to intrude the writer would be to intrude a different world. (Any “I” mentioned refers to a fictional character, not to the author.) Scientific writing claims complete objectivity in the real world; “I” would be irrelevant. A person speaking in an official capacity also uses a neutral viewpoint; his own personal views are excluded because he is not speaking personally at all.

The third kind of viewpoint is the transferred viewpoint. It is found most commonly in imagining mode. The message sender is once more withdrawn from the scene, but instead of presenting the referential material from a neutral viewpoint, he presents it as from within the message itself: the viewpoint is that of one of the participants in the message. In The Magician’s Nephew by C. S. Lewis, two children, Digory and Polly, share in almost all the adventures throughout, but the story is told from Digory’s viewpoint, as the title would indicate. The problem being resolved is his problem: events are presented as he sees them.

11.4.1.2 Degree of certainty

Degree of certainty is a prosody relevant in asserting and envisaging modes, but not in imagining mode. Generally an entire message is presented with considerable certainty: departures from this norm will then be indicated overtly. Examples of this are found in the Shellfish text: “is thought to be” indicates a lessening of certainty, and “the conclusion has to be” indicates strong certainty. The prosody of high degree of certainty that characterises Shellfish, is also seen in the British Medical Journal as a whole.

Deliberate uncertainty is occasionally exhibited in certain kinds of messages, especially in situations where to claim certainty might have awkward legal implications. If a murderer has been caught by the police, newscasters and reporters are careful to refer to him as “the accused” rather than as “the murderer,” since the case has not yet been heard in court. Advertisements also keep on the right side of the law by hedging their claims, usually in an unobtrusive way: “Our amazing new product could reduce your limescale problems,” “These high-energy batteries are believed to be the world’s longest-lasting,” “These unique videos could help enhance your energy levels.”

11.4.1.3 Evaluations and attitudes

Except in technical articles and other neutral material, communicators do not present their messages in a state of detachment. When they are presenting material that ranks high in their value system or in which for some other reason they feel emotionally involved, then elements of emphasis, increased tension, and specific emotions are likely to surface in the expression of the message. This occurs most commonly when the message is presented from the first-person viewpoint, but it can be well simulated in a transferred viewpoint also. Such emotion gives rise to special prominence in either case, over and above the relational and schematic prominence that is part of the core material.

In addition, the writer’s positive or negative attitude towards his topic can surface throughout a text in his choice of emotive lexical items, quotations, contrasts, and facts included or omitted. Advertisements are notorious for employing all these options: they minimise the price of the product (“less than you would pay for . . .”), maximise its virtues (“most versatile ever”) , denigrate its rivals (the competitor charges more, delivers less), and quote glowing commendations from some star, who is photographed using the product. This is, of course, blatant exploitation of the resources of language, but more normal and acceptable uses surround us daily: to have attitudes and express them is a normal human activity.

The Badger text exhibits a positive prosody relating to badgers, as expressed by emotive lexical items such as “best-loved,” “heritage,” “traditional,” etc. There is also a negative prosody relating to killing badgers (“brutally,” “illegal”) and a further positive one relating to the pro-badger campaign (“win,” “vital campaign,” “special . . . pack,” etc.). The presence or absence of such prosodies, and the switch from one prosody to another, are among the factors which determine the boundaries of units in this text.

11.4.2 Recipient-related prosodies

Some prosodies relate to the recipient’s knowledge and attitudes. It must be remembered, however, that the determining factor is not the recipient’s actual state of mind, but what the communicator perceives that state to be. The communicator monitors the recipient and adjusts the presentation of his message accordingly.

11.4.2.1 Information rate

Each language has characteristic patterns for communicating information—and different patterns for different kinds of information. But languages also have enough flexibility to superimpose on these existing patterns further devices to slow down the information rate if it is too fast for the recipient, or to condense the information if the recipient is finding it wordy or cumbersome. It is probable that languages differ in the degree of flexibility available to them, English being at the most flexible end of the scale.

A nursery tale (e.g., Three Little Pigs) has a very slow information rate. There is much repetition and the lexical items signal very simple concepts in a one-to-one way. Medical texts, on the other hand, even relatively popular ones such as Multiple Sclerosis, have a highly condensed information rate. There is virtually no redundancy and indeed a considerable amount of ellipsis. “Some figures” (2) means some figures concerning the occurrence of multiple sclerosis at high latitudes, “the increase” (6) means the increase in the number of cases of multiple sclerosis, and so on. Obviously to express this degree of detail overtly would be cumbersome and unacceptable to a medical readership. Most other audiences, however, would probably prefer something between the two. Thus in a different kind of journal, “some figures from Australia” would probably be expressed as “some relevant figures based on research done in Australia.” The writer for a medical journal can afford to cut out all the details: the readers are well able to supply them for themselves.

Another factor which makes for a very condensed information rate is the use of a single lexical item to signal a very complex concept. Words like “diagnosis” and “sanitation” would take several propositions to explain in full, and a phrase like “racial mix” is a very brief shorthand for something quite complex: the variety of races (inhabiting the cities) and their numerical proportions relative to each other. We have come a long way from the Three Little Pigs.

Where the audience needs the rate of information flow to be decreased and the content of the message to be spread out with slower realisation, numerous devices are available to the communicator. He may simply repeat something to give the audience a second chance to grasp it, or he may say much the same thing again in different words. By both these methods he is increasing the amount of surface-structure material realising one proposition. He may also make explicit any referential material that had been left implicit in the more condensed version. Or he may break up the referential material into a number of short units, which usually involves a certain amount of repetition of both referential material and relations. Short units are more readily assimilated than long ones, and this, combined with the redundant material thus included, makes for a much slower information rate.

Comparison of the surface form with the propositional display of its content will give some idea of the information rate of a particular text. We learn something about the information rate acceptable to different audiences when we note that Daffodil Leaves has twenty-two propositions expressed in sixteen clauses—an average of 1.375 propositions per clause—whereas Shellfish has fifteen propositions expressed in just six, giving an average of 2.5 propositions per clause.

11.4.2.2 Area of expectation

As the communicator presents his message, he is constantly aware of the expectations, both cultural and specific, entertained by the recipients. He therefore presents some material as according to expectation and other material as surprising. He may also moderate and vary the presentation of his message: a long stretch of expected material is dull, while the rapid presentation of unexpected material can give rise to something resembling mental indigestion. Audience attention is best maintained by alternation between the two.

Unexpected material provides special prominence when it surfaces in the discourse. An example is found in Badger (5): “Man” is not what the audience expects to find identified with “predator.”

11.4.2.3 Signposts

Writers do not usually rest content with just presenting their message; they also provide signposts to aid in its correct understanding. These are normally included at schematic boundaries; they signal overtly the change of mental direction which would in any case be obvious from the content being expressed. Thus in Barefoot (20), “The message is clear” means the next element in the message is the conclusion I am drawing from the foregoing evidence. In Shellfish (6), “the conclusion has to be that” means almost exactly the same.

This kind of prosody is, of course, intermittent in its realisation. It is prosodic not because of any quality of continuity, but because it stands aside from the hierarchical structure of units within units.

11.4.2.4 Mitigation and enhancement

Mitigation and enhancement prosodies arise not from monitoring the hearer’s knowledge or comprehension, but from monitoring his attitudes. What may be unwelcome is mitigated while what is normal or acceptable may be enhanced, for a variety of reasons. An example of mitigation is found in Badger (16) where “Please fill in the coupon” is a mitigated way in which to ask for money. Mitigation arises from the purpose of keeping relationships smooth.

Enhancement can be used to create a favourable impression, as in the use of the words “traditional,” “nation-wide,” and “harmless” near the beginning of the Badger text. Enhancement is also commonly used for the purpose of social acceptability or to add colour and warmth to what might otherwise be a rather dull or routine message.

In English there is a sort of inverse enhancement used in a typical kind of dry humour. It involves the presentation of some very unusual, important, or acceptable message as if it were a routine occurrence. This is not the same as mitigation, which is used to minimise something unwelcome in order to make it more acceptable. Inverse enhancement minimises in order to produce a degree of incongruity, again for social purposes. In the nature of the case, inverse enhancement usually occurs in conversations. Someone may say, “By the way, I’m getting married this afternoon,” using “by the way” as an incongruously downplayed way of introducing important information. The British constantly use inverse enhancement in the area of giving and receiving compliments.

An example of inverse enhancement in written material is found frequently in detective stories. An event or fact which is crucial to the correct solution of the mystery is deliberately downplayed so that the reader does not realise its significance. In real life such a clue would be highly important, hence in the reporting of it we would expect to find both referential and purposive prominence. But the writer, by contrasting it with something of apparently greater prominence, or by presenting it while the reader’s attention is somewhere else, in effect gives it negative prominence.

11.5 Special prominence

Before we embark on the study of the structural core of the message (its units and relations), we should give further consideration to special prominence (already discussed in section 10.6). Some texts exhibit little or no special prominence, but this is unusual. Much more commonly the writer uses a variety of prominence devices to highlight major points, to present certain facts in a positive light, and to influence the emotions or attitudes of the readers. Hence, to study prominence factors at an early stage in the analysis provides us with valuable clues to the writer’s purpose, and thus to our later structural analysis.

Of course, such clues are also provided by the use of natural prominence (see section 10.3.1). We will study this in connection with the appropriate chapters—purposive prominence in chapter 12, referential prominence in chapters 14 and 15, and relational prominence in chapters 16 and 17. But here we are considering special prominence, that is, the writer’s use of optional devices, over and above the structuring of the message core, to increase the effectiveness of his presentation.

Surface-structure devices for signalling special prominence fall into three main categories: lexical devices, rhetorical devices, and departure from norms. We will consider these in turn.

11.5.1 Special prominence signalled lexically

Some words inherently carry more prominence than others. The phrase “to the far corners of the globe” carries more prominence than “everywhere” or “in many places”; “an urgent message” and a “nation-wide campaign” are presented as more prominent than ordinary messages and more local campaigns. It is helpful to consider such lexical devices as falling into three main categories: words or phrases which express superlatives, those which carry emotive overtones, and those which have some other inherent forcefulness.

Our texts provide us with numerous examples of special prominence expressed by superlatives. We use this term rather widely to cover not only grammatical superlatives such as “one of Britain’s best-loved animals” (Badger 1), but also any expression indicating that something is unique (“only one predator” in Badger 4) or universal or widespread in extent (“Over one-third of humanity” in Barefoot 6). To say that there are people who “haven’t the wherewithal to irrigate a single field” carries much more prominence than to say that they “haven’t the wherewithal to irrigate their fields.” Uniqueness is not signalled only by words like “alone,” “single,” “one,” etc.; a very similar effect is achieved by the statement that a certain dye has a “one in 20 billion chance” of causing cancer (Radon 9).

Often special prominence marks the peak or punch line, as it does in the previous example from the Radon text, which is otherwise not prolific in prominence devices.

Sometimes special prominence is found to highlight the main purpose of the message, as in the London Wall text, which contains only one prominence device, a superlative. We read in segment 2 that a section of the outer wall had been discovered for the first time, and this point is repeated at the end of the message, where it says that officials had “never . . . until now” been able to see the outer wall. This, indeed, is the sole point of this newspaper report: archaeological discoveries which simply confirm previous findings are not newsworthy. (This is presumably why the barbican was banished to a virtual postscript: the implication is that barbicans have been found before.)

Words that carry emotive overtones create prominence. Notice the descriptions used in the Badger text: “traditional country name” (2); “brutally killed” and “illegal badger-digging” (7). Indeed, in this text the occurrence or non-occurrence of special prominence is a major clue to unit boundaries. The emotive phrase “underground homes” in 10 contrasts with the neutral phrase “badger sett” in 14, both phrases having the same reference. This alerts the analyst to look for a unit boundary between the two phrases, as the most likely explanation of the difference in attitude.

Words that are inherently forceful also create prominence: “serious malnutrition” (Barefoot 1) is more prominent than plain unadorned malnutrition. The pro-badger campaign of the Badger text is described as “urgent” (11) and “vital” (17); even the badge promised to donors is described as a “special” badge (22).

A text with very little special prominence is Daffodil Leaves, yet even here we find that the use of a force-bearing lexical item provides an important clue in our analysis. The expert says, in segment 5, that a period of six weeks is essential before the leaves are cut off. Why labour this point, when the aspiring gardener’s question has already been answered in segments 2–4? This is in fact our first clue to an important factor in the analysis: the expert realised that the gardener would not want to wait so long, hence he here insists on it—and later in the text returns to the same issue.

11.5.2 Special prominence signalled rhetorically

We are here considering two different kinds of special prominence, those signalled by figures of speech and those signalled by a deliberate, patterned arrangement of the material.

Figures of speech may be used prodigally or parsimoniously. They often abound in expressive texts—consider the Fountains text as an example. But sometimes a text written otherwise in perfectly straightforward prose uses a figure of speech; when it does, this usually signals some important point in its development. The Barefoot text uses a figure of speech (in this case a simile) only at the end (22), where, having already made his point in literal terms, the author goes on to make it again by using a simile (one which contains within itself a whole complex of other rhetorical devices in addition).

Patterned arrangement of the material can take several forms. Repetition (of a thought, not simply of words) is a common and effective device. We find an example in Fountains 7 and 10, where the rhetorical question lamenting the absence of fountains is expressed twice, flanking a contrasting reference to the only-too-present products of official policies.

The Fountains text also provides us with several examples of build-up, or cumulative prominence. This is a kind of repetition which adds fresh detail with each fresh mention, as in “more and more fountains, higher fountains, fountains like wine, like blue and green fire, fountains like diamonds in every square” (13).

Other rhetorical patterns are more commonly found in poetry or in highly structured arguments. One such pattern is the “sandwich structure,” as in Fountains 7 and 10, mentioned above, where a repeated element contains some other material, often contrastive or highlighted, between the two occurrences. Some sandwich structures are found at paragraph level or higher, the unit starting and ending in the same way.

Poetry provides us with another kind of patterned arrangement, the couplet, which occurs in a variety of associative relations. Chiasmus is yet another pattern: two referentially different elements are repeated in reverse order, forming a sort of mirror image.

11.5.3 Special prominence signalled by departure from norms

Any deviation from an expected norm exploits the element of surprise. It catches the attention, and is thereby prominent. The unexpectedness may be syntactic or lexical, as we shall see, but it also occurs whenever any element stands out as different from its surroundings, even though there is nothing inherently surprising about it otherwise. For example, in a third-person narrative, the sudden inclusion of directly reported speech tends to signal prominence—as it does in the London Wall text, where a representative of the museum is quoted to make the final point.

Departure from normal syntax usually takes the form either of unusual word order or of truncated constructions. In the Badger text, the use of the single word “Man” as a sentence in itself conveys a high degree of prominence. Similar prominence is achieved in Fountains 14 and 15, with the brief question “Crazy?,” and the equally brief answer, “Probably.”

Unusual word order also signals prominence, especially when an unexpected item is brought to the beginning or end of its clause or sentence. Such a device occurs most frequently in languages with a more flexible word order than English.

In English, the element of surprise is frequently employed in the lexical area. Unusual collocations (putting words together which are not usually found together) can have a striking effect. A weather forecaster on the BBC recently said that the southern counties were enjoying “wall-to-wall sunshine”—a happy expression for a day of continuous sunshine following a winter of almost continuous cloud. The texts in the Appendix have several examples of unusual collocations: “throwing dams and railways” at people is certainly not a normal collocation. And a total collocational clash is achieved in Fountains 16 with the juxtaposition of “delightfully” and “mad.”

11.5.4 Special prominence signalled visually

It is worth mentioning at this point that visual effects can also be used on the printed page in order to convey special prominence. In the Badger text whole sections are underlined, and in segment 14 the word “anyone” is in italics. Newspaper headlines, special fonts, positioning of photographs are all devices which can be used for prominence purposes. These will not be explored further here, but the analyst should bear in mind that it is not enough to simply label these as conveying prominence: it is necessary to state the specific function of the prominence in each instance, whether to highlight the topic, induce surprise, arouse emotion, or in some other way to induce a reaction in the recipient.

11.5.5 Degrees of special prominence

The foregoing discussion should have made it clear that special prominence varies greatly in its degree of impact on the reader. To call a campaign “vital,” or to promise someone a “special” badge, obviously conveys only a mild degree of prominence compared to the short, stark use of “Man” earlier in the Badger text.

Very often, these milder forms of prominence are used, not to arrest attention, but to convey a certain atmosphere, to elicit a certain kind of response, without the reader’s awareness: the writer seems to be aiming at a sort of subliminal prominence. All such devices provide valuable clues to analysis.

It is not possible to state categorically that certain prominence devices are mild while others are arresting in their effect: too much depends on the context in which they are found. But it is fair to say, regarding the degree of felt impact on the reader, that lexical prominence has on the whole less felt impact than rhetorical prominence, while deviation from norms signals more prominence than either.

12

SCHEMATIC AND NONSCHEMATIC MESSAGE PATTERNS

12.1 The difference between schematic and nonschematic patterns

12.2 The sources of schema patterns

12.2.1 The message sender’s purpose

12.2.2 The addressee’s anticipated attitude

12.2.3 The importance of the message content

12.3 Schema patterns in the three message genres

12.3.1 Volitional schema patterns

12.3.1.1 Common volitional schemas

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12.4 Messages with nonschematic patterns

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We must now give consideration to the significance of the message—those characteristics of the message which invest it with relevance and interest in the eyes of the message sender and of the addressee.

12.1 The difference between schematic and nonschematic patterns

A well-structured message does not present an overall uniformity; rather, it has development and thrust. The sender communicates the message as a directional entity, developing towards a communicative goal, and the addressee is drawn along this purposive pathway as he receives the message. As the message unfolds, some elements are perceived as more central to its development than others. They are signalled as such. We are therefore dealing in this chapter with prominent elements of a particular kind, elements that carry the purposive flow of the message and combine to form the significant patterning of the message. This we call its schema.

Some schemas have their source in the purposes and attitudes of the message sender and the addressee. These are called purposive schemas. Those which have their source in the salient elements of the content are called referential schemas.

There are also some messages which do not exhibit any developmental thrust. They have organisation, but no sense of progression towards a communicative goal, no sense of expectations aroused and fulfilled. Such messages have a nonschematic overall structure: they will be considered in a separate section (12.4).

As discussed in section 11:3.4, a message is characterised by the type of relations that knit its propositions together. Some messages exhibit mainly logical relations, others mainly chronological, and so on. It is important to remember that it is not these relations which give the message its schematic structure. Rather, they provide an underlying network or relational base, and this underlying network is then moulded by the schema relations into a pattern of purposive development. The schema relations form an overlay on relational bases of different kinds. Nonschematic messages exhibit no such overlay: their entire structure is carried by the cohesive relational network.

12.2 The sources of schema patterns

Different messages carry the characteristic stamp of different schema patterns. A detective story has a different purposive significance from a political address, and this shows up in the way that each develops and in the overall pattern of each. It might be thought that there must therefore be one schema for each different kind of message. But messages are communicated for such varied purposes that this would hardly be helpful. Instead, we are going to trace the notion of schema back to its source, or rather its sources, so that the analyst will be provided, not with a list of possible schema patterns, but with the criteria which will enable him to discern and display those patterns in any message.

Schema patterns have their sources in the message sender’s purpose (section 12.2.1), the addressee’s anticipated attitude (section 12.2.2), and the importance of the message content (section 12.2.3).

12.2.1 The message sender’s purpose

The controlling factor in establishing the schema of the message is the communicative purpose of the message sender. This is defined in terms of the three imports already discussed in sections 3.1, 7.3, and 10.3.3. The analyst must ask, Is the sender’s purpose to convey facts, instigate action, or share emotions and attitudes? These three purposes establish the three broad classes of message: informational, volitional, and expressive. We may call these three classes message genres, but it should be borne in mind that this term is sometimes used for classes of discourse defined by surface-structure characteristics rather than for messages defined by meaning categories as here.

In labelling a message as informational, volitional, or expressive, we have the speaker’s main purpose in mind. It is this purpose that causes him to present some unit or units as prominent, and others as less prominent. The most prominent unit is the head unit of the message, conveying the central information, evaluation, directive, and so on. (There may occasionally be several heads of equal prominence in additive relationship to each other, but normally there will be only one purpose to the message, and one head element.) It is to this head element that all the other elements in the schema relate, supporting it in some appropriate way. A directive, for example, may be supported by motivational units, while an evaluation would need a different kind of support, such as contrastive or evidential.

Thus the three genres each have a characteristic kind of head element, and each kind of head element has appropriate supporting elements relating to it. The entire schema consists of units which correlate appropriately with each other, combining to express the message sender’s purpose.

12.2.2 The addressee’s anticipated attitude

When a message sender communicates a message, he is wanting the addressee to respond in a certain way. If the message is informational, he wants the addressee to believe the message and be interested in it. If the message is volitional, he wants the addressee to perform a desired action or to give permission for its performance. If the message is expressive, he wants his attitude to be shared, reciprocated, or counterbalanced.

But it is possible that the addressee may not co-operate. He may disbelieve the information, be opposed to the evaluation, or completely reluctant to act as requested. In this case the message sender chooses supporting structures aimed at gaining the co-operation of the addressee and ensuring the success of the message. He monitors the addressee carefully both before and during the message, and shapes it appropriately. Messages that are essentially welcome to the addressee do not need the same kind of supporting structures as those to which he is resistant.

12.2.3 The importance of the message content

Some things in themselves seem much more important than other things, regardless of the purpose of the message sender and the attitude of the addressee. Events acquire saliency by being unusual (an eclipse of the sun is much more discussed than its daily rising and setting) or by affecting a large number of people (a national election is much more important than an election for the local council) or by being particularly desirable or undesirable. Referential, as distinct from purposive, schema patterns have their source in the salient referential content of the message.

From the point of view of message schema, the most important kind of referential material is that which creates or resolves some kind of tension. Significant tensions in the construction of messages are those involving something undesirable, unexplained, or difficult of attainment. When any such tension occurs in the message, an expectation is aroused in the addressee that later in the message this tension will be resolved. Thus problems are matched with their resolutions, purposes with their fulfilments, and puzzles and mysteries with their explanations.

From this arises one further characteristic of a referential schema. It provides a kind of framework on which the message is constructed, consisting of the most important elements in the message organised in such a way that the presentation of the first part of the framework arouses very specific expectations as to what is to follow. Thus the addressee interprets the message as he receives it, not only in the light of the foregrounded topic, but also in the light of the anticipated schema. As he receives the message, he is constantly mapping it onto his expectations to see if they correlate.

Salient material is always of interest, hence it is to be expected that tension-based patternings of the kind just discussed will be found in all genres. But in messages with a purposive schema such patternings as problem-resolution will be found to supplement or support the main purposive thrust of the message (as in the Barefoot and Badger texts). It is only in messages which are neutral with respect to message sender and addressee (i.e., messages with no purposive schema) that the referential schema patternings are the dominant developmental feature. In most novels, for example, the author is completely neutral with respect to the readers: his only purpose is to arouse and maintain their interest. Hence in this kind of writing the tension-providing schemas are paramount.

12.3 Schema patterns in the three message genres

It will be obvious from the foregoing discussion that the volitional and expressive genres, since they involve author-reader relations, will normally exhibit purposive schemas, whereas informational genre will typically exhibit referential schemas. We will first consider the different kinds of purposive schema (sections 12.3.1 and 12.3.2) and then go on to discuss referential schema patterns in 12.3.3.

12.3.1 Volitional schema patterns

The only essential element in a volitional message is the proposed action, but this on its own provides no purposive development, hence there is no schema. Supporting elements, however, are frequently found. These vary according to whether the addressee is viewed as contesting the proposed action or co-operating in it. If the addressee is co-operative, whether from social necessity or personal inclination, the message may consist of instructions organised on some referential parameter such as time or space (see section 12.4.1.1), in which case there is, as before, no purposive development. But if the message sender addresses the needs and desires of the addressee (in uncontested messages) or his reluctance to perform the proposed action (in contested messages), this gives rise to a variety of schematic patterns.

12.3.1.1 Common volitional schemas

Uncontested Volitionals.   The recipient of an uncontested message may be willing in principle to perform the proposed action, but he may need further information, advice, offers of assistance, or other reassurance. These give rise to different kinds of schema relation. If, for example, an invitation to a social function concludes with the name and line of the nearest underground station and a list of bus services that pass the door, then this information does not belong to the volitional core of the message, but stands in an enabling relation to it.

Contested Volitionals.   A volitional proposal may be contested for a variety of reasons, each relating to some key factor in the situation. The key factors are the message sender, the addressee, and the proposed action; each gives rise to a different schema pattern.

If the addressee mistrusts the message sender or contests his right to make the request or order, the message sender has to validate himself in the eyes of the addressee, defending his right or suitability to make the request. This gives rise to a supporting element we call validation of message sender. Such a validation is frequently found in political pamphlets and in appeals for money.

If the addressee is unwilling to perform the action, although not objecting to it in principle, the message sender will provide motivating support. This can take a variety of forms, such as inducements (performance will be rewarded), threats (nonperformance will have undesirable consequences), or appeal to the conscience of the addressee or to his personal relationship with the message sender. The form that the motivation takes depends on the attitude of the addressee to the proposed action. People are assumed to be eager to buy fashionable clothes, bask on tropical beaches, or enjoy a good pension on retirement. Hence advertisements (an important volitional subgenre) usually appeal directly to the self-interest of the addressee. But very few people have a similar eagerness to give money to good causes, so fund-raising letters (another important subgenre) cannot appeal directly to the recipient’s desires. Instead, appeal to self-interest is muted or subliminal, and the motivating support takes the form of an appeal to the recipient’s better nature. The money is to be used for the benefit of the community or some smaller social group, or to further some cause of unquestioned value such as the environment or the relief of suffering.

If the addressee disapproves of the proposed action or considers it trivial, or in some other way contests it, the message sender will provide support validating the action. This often takes the form of an evaluation of the contested action. In such a case the message provides an example of the purposive chain in operation, with evaluation of an activity leading the recipient on to a directive concerning it.

Mixed schemas.   Sometimes volitional schemas contain supporting elements from expressive or referential schemas. The use of evaluative support has been mentioned in the preceding section. Referential schemas are used in advertisements to attract and maintain the reader’s attention. If the reader’s problem is immobility, then a stairlift provides the resolution. If the reader’s purpose is to gain a qualification or take a midwinter break, then appropriate fulfilments are offered in the form of a home study course or a travel brochure. The overall schema is determined by the primary purpose of the writer, while his subsidiary purposes (to interest, persuade, etc.) determine the supporting elements.

12.3.1.2 Example of volitional schema: Daffodil Leaves

The following text is an example of a volitional schema.

(1) How soon can I cut the leaves off my daffodils?

(2) Leaves should be left for six weeks

(3) after the last flower has died

(4) before cutting back.

(5) This period is essential

(6) to rebuild foodstores in the bulb

(7) so that it can grow and flower the following year.

(8) You should remove flowerheads

(9) as soon as they die

(10) so that energy is not diverted

(11) into seed production,

(12) but leave the flower stalk.

(13) If you find the fading bulb leaves unsightly

(14) try planting the daffodils under a spreading deciduous shrub such as hydrangea, flowering quince or fishbone cotoneaster.

(15) The daffodils will stand out against the bare branches of the shrub in the early spring,

(16) but later on the fading bulb leaves will be disguised by the shrub’s leaves and flowers.

The Daffodil Leaves text provides several interesting features schematically, since it seems to have characteristics of both contested and uncontested volitionals. It consists of instructions to a reader who sent in a question about daffodils to the gardening page of a magazine. Inasmuch as the reader requested advice about a specific problem (when to cut the leaves), one would assume that he was willing to carry out the advice when given. This would put the text, theoretically, into the uncontested category—all that was needed was more information.

There is, however, a large reservoir of gardening knowledge shared by the reader and the gardening expert, in the light of which the expert assumes a possible reluctance on the part of the reader to carry out the advice given. This suspected reluctance gives rise to supporting elements validating the proposed action (with reasons why it is necessary) and providing inducements.

The question “How soon can I cut the leaves off my daffodils?” is essentially asking for information about the timing of an agreed action, cutting daffodil leaves. The fact that it is phrased “how soon can I” rather than “when should I” implies that the reader wishes to perform the action as soon as possible. The use of “can” indicates the reader’s awareness of other constraints on his proposed action: what he really means is How soon can I cut my daffodil leaves without harming the plants?

The overt question is answered in the head element of the text (2–4) without preamble: the gardening expert recommends a six-week delay after flowering is over before cutting the leaves. There are two supplementary heads (8 and 12), which give unsolicited but closely related advice. Both the main head, “leave for six weeks” (2), and the first supplementary head, “remove flowerheads” (8), are followed by supporting units, defending the proposed action in terms of its purpose, in ways which the expert assumes will be accepted by the questioner. He adds a little extra pressure towards compliance by using the strong evaluative term “essential” (5).

The expert then addresses himself to the questioner’s low-key but detectable eagerness to cut the leaves as soon as possible. He is aware that the advice to wait six weeks will not be welcome. He provides a compromise suggestion (13–16) as an inducement to obeying the main injunction. It is not, as the questioner seems to think, a straight choice between cutting and unsightliness: the compromise suggestion, if followed, would combine delay in cutting with maximum visual appeal. The inducement is essentially a self-contained problem-resolution schema.

The schema, therefore, contains the following elements: advised action (2–4), advised supplementary action (8–9, 12), validation of these actions as reasonable (5–7, 10, 11), inducement towards carrying out the action (13–16). As in a large number of volitional messages, the action under consideration (here, the cutting of daffodil leaves) is accepted by both addressee and message sender; what is debatable is some aspect of the proposed action, here its timing.

12.3.2 Expressive schema patterns

There are two essential elements in an expressive schema: the object or situation acting as stimulus, and the attitude or evaluation expressed in response to it, often with more emotional involvement than in the other two imports (cf. section 7.4). The stimulus may be expressed overtly, or it may be understood from the situational context if suitably foregrounded in the minds of the speaker and addressee. In either case it is conceptually present, being referred to, usually repeatedly, in the expression of attitude.

If the message sender is expressing an emotion or attitude, he will be anticipating and seeking to induce an appropriate response. If he is expressing happiness, he will want a response in the same vein; if he is expressing love, he will want it reciprocated; if he is expressing dread or fear, he will want a counterbalancing response, that is, reassurance. Different supporting elements may be introduced in the attempt to bring about the desired effect, for example, a contrastive element evoking a negative emotion, in order to give extra force to the positive one being presented, as in the Fountains text.

If the message is evaluative, the attitude of the addressee is particularly determinative of schema patterns. If the message sender anticipates possible disagreement, he will support his evaluation by a variety of means: comparison of his evaluation with other acceptable ones, contrast with unacceptable ones, favourable deductions from his own position, favourable consequences associated with it, and so on.

12.3.2.1 Common expressive schemas

Uncontested evaluations. A common expressive schema, especially in short messages, consists of the presentation of facts, followed by a quoted evaluative comment. Thus, a Reader’s Digest report on farm holidays for inner-city children consists of two short paragraphs providing factual details, followed by a quotation from teachers saying how much their pupils have learned. Similarly, a brief report on the installation of an unusual vending machine in a hospital is followed by an expression of approval from the consultant in charge of the department. This approach is slightly more forceful than simply having the writer express approval in his own person. The authority is quoted to show that the evaluation is being made by someone who is in a position to know. This schema is generally used when no real opposition to the evaluation is anticipated. No argument is entered into. No evidence supporting the evaluation is provided. This schema could be called “facts: quoted evaluation” or “facts: authoritative evaluation,” highlighting its distinctive feature. The writer, however, may be assumed to be in sympathy with the evaluation he quotes.

Contested evaluations. Where the evaluation is being defended against criticism, the defence may take the form of illustrative examples (as in The Barefoot Revolution), or of deductions supporting the position being defended. Such deductions either claim desirable consequences (“Assuming my evaluation is the right one, X would follow, and this is obviously true/desirable/good”) or reject untrue or undesirable ones (“If my evaluation were wrong, X would follow, and it does not, or would be undesirable if it did.”). Alternatively, the writer may appeal to the emotions, to the received wisdom of the culture, to statistics, or to some recognised authority. All these have the schematic pattern evaluation-defence. The terms “thesis-evidence” are also used to describe this schema pattern, but this schema must be carefully distinguished from scientific or similar proofs in the informational genre, where the thesis consists not of an evaluation but of a fact posited as true, and where the evidence considered acceptable is restricted and normally deductive in nature.

Another schematic pattern found in contested evaluations is that of approved evaluation-alternative evaluation(s). The approved evaluation is usually that favoured by the writer, who presents alternative evaluations solely in order to display their weaknesses and show the approved evaluation in a good light by contrast. Sometimes an alternative evaluation is presented which is totally opposed to the approved evaluation; the two are contradictory to each other, they could not both be true simultaneously. This gives rise to the pattern approved evaluation-contrary evaluation.

Attitudinal schemas and emotive schemas. Messages that express an emotion or attitude do not develop along the highly structured lines of contested or opposed evaluations. Rather, the appeal is to the feelings; the message progresses not by a reasoned argument, but by association. Such messages often make their point by word associations, implications, and figures of speech. In fact, they are often nonschematic, in that the only development exhibited is associative rather than purposive (see section 12.4.2).

Mixed schemas. For the analyst, the most difficult expressive texts are those of mixed structure, that is, partly logical and partly associative. These occur when the message sender is very eager to persuade his audience or readership, yet wishes to sound sober and logical at the same time. Many political speeches, for example, apparently aim to prove a point logically, and a contested evaluation schema can be discerned, but such an analysis fails to come to grips with the real thrust of the message, which is carried by implication and association. Often this can be handled as a strong prosodic overlay on the evaluative schema, but sometimes the schema almost disappears if emotion takes over.

12.3.2.2 Example of expressive schema: The Barefoot Revolution

The following text is an example of an expressive schema, of the evaluative type.

(1) In Bolivia, 43 per cent of under-fives suffer serious malnutrition;

(2) in parts of Brazil only half the children survive to the end of their first year at school;

(3) in some areas of Nigeria, land under millet has fallen by 30–40 per cent in the last ten years

(4) (the population has risen by 25 per cent);

(5) in Cameroon . . . And so the numbers pile up.

(6) Over one-third of humanity has insufficient resources, is underfed, badly cared for and without education.

(7) First World ‘development aid’ has often made things worse:

(8) the Itaipu Dam cost the Brazilians ( . . . )1 $25 billion

(9) (national debt $110 billion)

(10) and produces electricity at 30 per cent more than before;

(11) the Aswan Dam prevented silt from flowing to the Nile Delta

(12) and destroyed Egypt’s sardine industry.

(13) There is a better way.

(14) The Barefoot Revolution examines 93 small-scale projects,

(15) run by local people

(16) which address specific local problems:

(17) a marmalade factory in the Philippines which subsidizes local schools;

(18) a four-person factory in Burkina Faso making pots from old cars;

(19) a community mill in Zaire to take some of the work-load off women.

(20) The message is clear:

(21) successful aid requires intimate knowledge of local conditions;

(22) throwing dams and railways at people who haven’t the wherewithal to irrigate a single field is like posting a starving man a ‘Get well’ card.

(23) Nick Crane

(24) The Barefoot Revolution by Bertrand Schneider. IT Publications.

(1 See section 17.3.1 for an explanation of these parenthetical ellipsis points.)

In this text the situation acting as stimulus takes the form of a problem, Third World poverty (1–6), followed by two alternative solutions. The first of these, large-scale projects (7–12), is negatively evaluated; the second, small-scale local projects (13–19), is positively evaluated. The first, therefore, represents a contrary evaluation to the second, the approved evaluation. The message concludes with a summary restatement of the two contrasting evaluations (20–22).

The schema developed in The Barefoot Revolution exhibits characteristics typical of evaluative material, especially in the interplay of generic evaluations and specific examples. The claim being made is that small-scale local projects are the best way to tackle the problem of Third World poverty. First of all, details of that poverty are presented, providing necessary background information and posing the problem which is restated generically at the end of the unit (6). “Development aid” is then suggested as a possible solution, but immediately rejected on the grounds that it “has often made things worse” (7). This generic claim is then pressed home by the specific examples of the Itaipu Dam (8–10) and the Aswan Dam (11–12). Against the background of this rejected approach, the approved solution is presented, again first generically (14–16) and then by specific examples (17–19).

Another kind of message support that occurs in this text is the underscoring of the evaluation favoured by the author by means of signposting comments. The first of these is “There is a better way” (13). This provides the reader with a signal that the alternative about to be presented is the one approved by the author. In itself it presents nothing, but it acts as a signpost to the reader at a crucial transitional point. The second schema-related signpost introduces the summary restatement at the end. Again this adds almost no content: “The message is clear” (20) simply indicates that the punchline is about to be presented. The restatement of the approved evaluation follows, in succinct and literal terms (21). This in turn is followed by a restatement of the contrary evaluation, which is rejected this time, somewhat more emotively, by the use of hyperbole, simile, and contraexpectation (22).

12.3.3 Informational schema patterns

The informational genre is immensely diverse. Informational message structure, unlike that of volitional and attitudinal messages, does not arise from the attitudes of the participants, but directly from the message content. The sender-addressee relationship does, of course, affect the form of the message, but it does not determine the overall structure. Rather it gives rise to prosodies such as familiarity, hostility, etc., and to supporting elements.

When a message sender is conveying information, he does so with the purpose of being believed. If he has reason to think that the addressee is sceptical, he may either quote a more authoritative source than himself or simply present further information in the hope of providing a more credible information package.

Credibility-providing additions obviously do not affect the structure of the original message. Authoritative sources that may be cited tend to occur obscurely, in footnotes or parentheses at the end of a sentence, as in Radon 3 and Multiple Sclerosis 2. They stand outside the structure of the message proper.

A different kind of information-giving situation is that of written teaching materials, where the writer’s communicative endeavours are directed, not towards being believed, which is assumed, but towards being understood. If unfamiliar and complex material is being presented, the teacher/author has to use a variety of techniques, such as illustrations, specific examples, and restatements in order to communicate successfully. But these efforts only fill out and supplement the schema patterns of the message; they do not provide them.

12.3.3.1 Common informational schemas

What then are the factors that provide the structure—the schema—in an informational message? Basically, it is the message sender’s desire to create interest. For though the message sender wants to communicate information, he must first attract and then hold the addressee’s interest. Otherwise, the addressee (often envisaged rather than actually present) may exercise his option of not reading the newspaper article or not buying the novel. It is this interest-arresting purpose that gives rise to schema patterns involving the build-up and resolving of tensions.

If the tension arises in the area of what is known and unknown (to the reader, or to the central character), the schema will be that of mystery-explanation. If it arises in the area of the will, the resultant schema will be purpose-fulfilment or plan-execution. If it arises in the area of felt need or distress, the schema will be problem-resolution.

Short informational messages may have a schema consisting solely of two elements-in-tension as just listed. Longer messages may have a much more complex structure. Several kinds of complexity are found.

First, more than one schematic pairing may be present simultaneously, the different factors interwoven in a unified structure involving one and the same set of characters. Thus, what is essentially a detective story with a mystery-explanation structure may have a subsidiary romantic interest with a purpose-fulfilment structure: the hero purposes to marry the heroine but cannot do so until the mystery is explained. Or a factual report with purpose-fulfilment as its main structural parameter (e.g., a description of how someone sailed the Atlantic single-handed or carried out a war-time rescue mission) may have a series of sub-units of a problem-resolution structure providing interest along the way: problems often arise in the process of pursuing a purpose to a satisfactory fulfilment. In fact, the story would lack interest if they did not.

Sometimes a single schematic pattern is developed in complex ways. A single event or situation (a death, an accident, a change of government) may constitute a problem which affects different characters in different ways: several solutions will then have to be pursued to their conclusion. The opposite is also found: several totally different problems are resolved in one climactic, all-embracing solution.

There are, in addition, subsidiary schema elements of various kinds. The commonest are setbacks, in which some delay, sidetrack, or misunderstanding postpones a successful conclusion. There are also building-up or atmosphere-providing sub-units. And there is frequently a final unit occurring after the solution or explanation, hence standing a little apart from the main schematic structure. This may take the form of an evaluative comment from the author, or it may carry the story a little further to its outcome (i.e., the resultant situation).

12.3.3.2 Example of informational schema on a timeline base: The Motorist and the Joggers

The following is an example of a text with an informational schema on a timeline base.

(1) A motorist pulled over on a side street to have a nap.

(2) As he settled down in the seat and closed his eyes,

(3) a jogger rapped on his window to ask the time.

(4) Bleary-eyed, he found his watch

(5) and proclaimed it to be 8 a.m.

(6) Sleeping at last,

(7) he was soon awakened by another jogger rapping on the window.

(8) “Excuse me, sir, do you know the time?” he asked.

(9) Looking at his watch,

(10) he told the man it was 8.30.

(11) At this rate he wasn’t getting much sleep,

(12) so he wrote a short note

(13) and stuck it on the window for all to see.

(14) It stated: “I don’t know the time.”

(15) Again the man settled down for his sorely needed nap.

(16) A few minutes later another jogger came along

(17) and began rapping on the window.

(18) “Hey, mister,” he said, “it’s a quarter to nine.”

This text is obviously ordered on a timeline, covering a 45-minute period, with each episode clearly signalled as to the time of its occurrence. Such exactitude is unusual in timeline texts: other signals, also found in the text, are much more common—past tense verbs, adverbs of time (“at last,” “soon,” “again,” “a few minutes later”), and a time-related connective (“as”).

The text also has a very clear schematic structure. It is an example of the purpose-fulfilment schema, although the motorist’s purpose is not actually fulfilled, this constituting part of the humour of the text.

The purpose is signalled in a very typical way: it is expressed in a purpose clause (“to have a nap”) early in the text (segment 1), which relates to the main participant in the narrative. (The motorist is mentioned in almost every segment, and it is he who pursues the purpose throughout). We will defer until chapter 13 the discussion of dividing a text into sub-units. For now we will simply point out that after the statement of purpose, the schema takes the form of two obstacles to fulfilment, followed by an attempt to overcome obstacles, which is found, in the final failed fulfilment, to have been unsuccessful.

It would be possible to label the obstacles as “problems” and the attempt to overcome them as “attempted resolution,” but this, while reducing the total number of labels needed, is not really illuminating. The obstacles are problems solely because they are hindrances in the way of fulfilling a purpose—there is nothing inherently problem-causing about being asked the time. It is better to give labels which clearly relate to the overall schematic structure. This relationship of the obstacles to the overall purpose is clearly signalled in the text: the first obstacle is seen to be such because the motorist had already “closed his eyes” (2) and was “bleary-eyed” (4). The second obstacle is signalled both at its onset (“sleeping at last,” “soon awakened” (6-7)) and in a following evaluation (“wasn’t getting much sleep” (11)). Since texts are very varied, it may on occasion be necessary to invent labels rather than select from a fixed list, but invented labels should always fulfil the two criteria of relating to the overall schema and being supported by textual evidence.

12.3.3.3 Example of informational schema on a themeline base: Shellfish

This next text illustrates a different kind of informational schema, on a themeline base.

(1) In Britain in the last decade substantial increases have been seen in infections acquired from uncooked shellfish—

(2) especially cockles and oysters.

(3) These include both gastroenteritis and hepatitis (World Health Organisation Weekly Epidemiological Record 1988; 63:133–4).

(4) The cause is thought to be increasing contamination of estuaries by sewage;

(5) until this pollution is controlled

(6) the conclusion has to be that

(7) “bivalve shellfish cannot be supplied with a guarantee that they are free of virus contamination.”

The Shellfish text exhibits dual schematic structure. Considered as mystery-explanation (What causes increased infections?—increased estuary pollution), the schema terminates in the normal way, with an acceptable explanation (4). But viewed as problem-resolution (What can be done about increased infections?—nothing at the moment), the schema does not resolve itself as anticipated. The evidence that it does have to be viewed not only as a mystery but as a problem lies in the last sentence, which overtly expresses not the solution, but the failure to find one (7). Real life does not necessarily resolve tensions as readily as the novelist.

12.4 Messages with nonschematic patterns

We now turn to the study of messages which have neither purposive nor tension-resolving development. These messages, as might be predicted, occur in situations where the will and purposes of the author and readers are irrelevant or backgrounded (hence no purposive development is required) and where the interest of the readers is already assured (hence no tension-resolving development is required).

Nonschematic messages are not unstructured, but their structure arises, as we saw in section 12.1, from the cohesive relational network linking together the referential material. The resultant patterns vary considerably: we shall be studying some representative texts in this section. It should also be borne in mind that in a long schematic message there may well be nonschematic sub-units (e.g., descriptions, reported facts, etc.) which play a supporting role in the overall schema, but which themselves require analysis in nonschematic terms as here. (An example is found in the Barefoot text, segments 14–19, which along with the signpost in 13 constitute the positively evaluated solution in the total schema. But in itself the unit is nonschematic in structure, being patterned on the associative generic-specific relation.)

Like schematic messages, nonschematic messages may be informational, volitional, or expressive. In the following sections we will consider each in turn, making clear the relationship between the purpose of the message and the relational patterns employed.

12.4.1 Nonschematic volitional messages

12.4.1.1 Directives

Directives which are not contested need no pressure from the message sender. Hence a command in a written text is given in order to fill some gap in the reader’s knowledge, not in order to persuade him. Nonschematic directives therefore take different forms according to the knowledge gap to be filled. They also differ, like any other text, according to the relational structures linking the whole together.

Usually, in a directive message, there is one predominant event, whether it be purchasing, making, repairing or whatever. The messages, and the texts expressing them, vary according to the relationship between the knowledge gap and that event. If the reader does not know how to carry out the directed event, then the text will consist of a series of instructions, as in do-it-yourself manuals, recipes, and step-by-step procedures of all sorts. If the knowledge gap concerns some participant or objects involved in the event, then the text may look like straight information, often in the form of a list, supplying the required knowledge. In such cases the predominant event may be mentioned only once. It may even be left implicit and not mentioned at all—as in a shopping list, which normally omits the directive “buy.” (Such a list may be a request to the reader or a reminder to the writer: the actual list is unaffected by this distinction and indeed may be compiled before any decision has been made as to who will make the purchases.)

Let us now consider a few examples to see which relational structures they exemplify. “How-to” messages consist of a list of instructions which will almost certainly have to be carried out successively, probably in a specific order (the water must be added to the flour, not the other way round). The instructions are usually presented along a timeline: “Place the patient in a half-sitting position, support with pillows, loosen clothing around the neck.” Negative instructions are, of course, off the timeline, but relevant throughout: “Do not give food or drink. Do not move the patient.”

Other instructive messages have a primarily spatial organisation, with time involved only because it inevitably takes time to get from one place to another, for example:

The reserve (TG/342063) is reached from the A47 Norwich to Yarmouth road by turning through Brundall. Beyond the railway bridge turn sharp right and right again into Low Road. The reserve car park is situated half a mile along on the right. To reach the hide, visitors must cross the level crossing on foot with care.

Notice that the instructions assume that the reader has a map (it starts with a grid reference) and that the directions involve places (“Brundall”), readily identifiable objects (“A47,” “railway bridge”), or inherently spatial orientations (“beyond,” “right,” “half a mile”). Notice also the variety of surface forms used to convey the instructions: a passive indicative (“is reached”), an imperative (“turn”), an unrealised imperative (“(turn) right again”), and an indirect imperative (“visitors must cross”).

Messages which relate to one single event by providing details relating to objects and participants are normally presented along a nonchronological parameter: it does not usually matter much which items on the shopping list are bought first. Topic-based organisation is common (dairy products, frozen goods, fruit and vegetables, etc.). Sometimes a spatial element is also present: a well-organised list for a visit to the supermarket can read almost like a conducted tour of its floor layout.

Some single-event directives revolve around participants. A will, for instance, contains essentially only one event, “give and bequeath,” then fills the knowledge gap with “to my wife . . . to my son . . .” and so on.

12.4.1.2 Offers

Many offers take the form of advertisements where goods or services are offered for sale. An advertisement may occupy a single column inch or a double page spread in a newspaper or magazine. Some publications consist wholly of offers of goods for sale which are usually arranged topically (clothing first, then jewellery, etc.). The essential details concerning each item are presented briefly and according to predictable patterns (the purchaser wishes to know the precise height of the bookcase, the exact weight of the sleeping bag, etc.).

Other nonschematic offers take different forms. They may be quite highly evaluative, as in an advertisement for an amusement park or a holiday village. The evaluative element (which in a schematic directive message forms part of the supporting structure) is distributed throughout, as in the Midget Pump text in section 12.4.2.1. (This text itself might easily have constituted an offer, but was in fact purely evaluative in its original context. It was a review, not an advertisement).

Other offers are, by contrast, almost legal in their formality. “A scholarship is available to any former pupil of Holton Hall School . . . ,” “A reward is offered . . . ,” “Suitable candidates should apply in writing . . .” The relational structure simply fills in the blanks in the event complex—who is eligible, on what conditions, what is offered. As with all nonschematic messages, the relational organisation is derived from a familiar mental scenario based on experience.

12.4.2 Nonschematic expressive messages

12.4.2.1 Evaluative messages

Most evaluative messages develop along a line of argument in order to persuade the readers. Therefore, in the nature of the case, they are schematic. Some evaluative messages, however, anticipate no opposition. They are developed not by argument but by association and description. The writer presents facts, but by his lexical choices he simultaneously makes clear his evaluation of the facts. The following example, Continental Midget Pump, is taken from a mountain-biking magazine, with trade names changed:

Midget pumps are compact, cheap and portable—although it does take ages to get hard air into the tyre.

At 8 ins long you get the high pressures of a long pump, with the convenience of being able to fit it on to the bike using either the water bottle bosses, or via two clips for the frame tubes. An adapter and spare rubber bit is supplied to fit most makes of valve.

The aluminium shorty fits into a jersey pocket and is ideal for demi-rides or popping down to the shops, and it makes a good spare in case your regular Big Daddy pump busts in the middle of nowhere.

In this text there is no schematic development. Instead an evaluative summary is followed by a description of the item in question and how it is fitted to the bicycle. This is essentially informative, but positive evaluation is indicated by “high pressures,” “convenience,” “to fit most makes,” and “makes a good spare.” The organisation is that of a typical object-describing template (see 17.1.2), involving size and structure, relation to associated objects (here the bicycle), and usefulness.

12.4.2.2 Attitudinal messages

An example of an attitudinal text is Fountains (see Appendix). The original version by J. B. Priestley was evaluative, but the shortened Reader’s Digest version is an excellent example of an attitudinal text. Here the only development consists of referential material in contrastive relationship. Undoubtedly, Priestley was making a point, he had a purpose. If the reader follows along the purposive chain, he comes to the evaluative conclusion that modern officialdom has its priorities wrong. But this conclusion is not supported by reasoned arguments; it is all done by the expression of attitudes and emotion, from the opening words, “Fountains enchant me,” to the final cumulative phrase, “graceful, exquisite, beautiful fountains.” The development in the message itself consists of movement from the topic of fountains to the contrasted topic of official policies, and back again. The topic of fountains is realised using vivid vocabulary and numerous metaphors and similes, the effect being enhanced by the cumulative constructions used. The topic of official policies is given much less space, and expressed in suitably official language. It is this contrast which carries the message that Priestley felt positive towards fountains and negative towards official policies: there is no evaluative schema as such. Nor are the lexical indicators soberly evaluative as in the Midget Pump text. Rather the vocabulary used expresses, not assessment, but emotion (“enchant,” “magical,” “dazzling white glory”).

12.4.3 Nonschematic informational messages

12.4.3.1 Timeline messages

In timeline messages facts are presented in the order of their actual occurrence; there is no overlay of expectation or tension. The accurate presentation of the facts is all that is required. The minutes of a meeting and medical reports are examples: it is obviously important to know whether a particular committee member resigned before or after a strongly worded debate or whether the patient’s temperature went up before or after he was given a certain medication. Such a message constitutes a record of what events took place and in what order: provided the author is a duly accredited person, the message is neutral as to both the author and the recipients. The whole purpose of the message is vested in the facts, the facts as related chronologically.

Other timeline messages are more informal. Diaries may be filled with much evaluative and attitudinal comment (“Marvellous time at class: my presentation a great success—even Prof. was purring”), but depending on the outlook and habits of the diarist, they may simply consist of a chronologically ordered list of each day’s events. “Got up late: no breakfast. Terrible traffic on ringroad. Perkins off again so v. busy day. Giles and Deb dropped by for supper, then chess with J. for an hour. Early bed.” Such a record consists of salient facts, in order, and without embellishment. Even although the events involved the author, they are recorded objectively, and the only relationship between them is the time relationship.

12.4.3.2 Messages not on a timeline

Informational messages which are not organised on a timeline tend to consist of facts presented for their own sake, without discussion or evaluation. They may be facts presented as new, hence interesting in their own right, or they may be already known facts presented so as to make them accessible to a large audience.

The presentation of new facts. Newspapers present facts that are of interest to a wide audience. Perhaps surprisingly, they usually contain few purely informational messages; most of the material consists of information with a strongly evaluative overlay. Short news items, however, often lack this overlay and consist solely of information. Such items tend to start with a summary of the event or situation being reported, followed by specific details (e.g., the cause or result of the event, the name and age of participants, etc.). The source of the information is often included also, with or without quoted comments from some major participant. As a result of this approach, an information pattern emerges not otherwise common in English informational material: essentially the same information is presented more than once, but with increasing detail, as in the following text, entitled London Wall Find:

(1) A 10-metre section of the London wall has been found by Museum of London archaeologists,

(2) who discovered part of the outer wall for the first time,

(3) it was announced last night.

(4) The remains, near Fenchurch Street Station, are to be preserved in a building

(5) being developed on the site by Arundel House (City) Ltd,

(6) which financed a seven-week investigation.

(7) “We have never been able to see the outer wall until now,”

(8) the museum said.

(9) A barbican was also found.

In this text, the event realised in surface structure by “has been found” (1) is referred to again by “discovered” (2), to which is attached further information about the discovery: “for the first time” (2). The object referred to as “a 10-metre section of the London wall” in segment 1 is referred to in segment 2 as “part of the outer wall,” and in 4 as “The remains,” with additional information attached: “near Fenchurch Street Station.” The use of repetition in this way makes possible the reporting of considerable detail without information overload.

The first four segments of this text constitute the informational core of the message. Starting with 4, which acts as a pivot in the structure, we come to the development of the core event. This consists here, as not infrequently happens, of an outline of future events brought about by the event of the core (4--6). This unit could be labelled outcome. Other kinds of development material are implications, enablement, cause and explanation of the core information. Undoubtedly other categories of development material can be found. The way to recognise development material is that it presents new information not contained in the informational core, but supporting the core in some relevant way.

Segments 7 and 8 of London Wall constitute a unit which could be labelled reaction to core information. In this instance, the reaction is that of a close participant (a museum spokesman) whose actual words are quoted. In other cases the reaction reported may be that of the people affected (e.g., fear, relief, or perplexity), without any direct quotation being involved.

Segment 9 consists of supplementary information, that is, of information related to the core in definable ways, but of less importance. In the London Wall text the supplementary information concerns the same event as the core (“found” in 9 refers to essentially the same event as that in 1 and 2), but the object involved (“barbican” i.e., a defensive tower, probably at a gate) is considered of less importance than the section of wall first mentioned in 1 and elaborated on in 2–4.

The London Wall example presents just one news item, with very little additional material. Longer news items tend to present material related by topic area, as in the following example, Holiday Treat for Pensioners, which is based on several items from a local newspaper.

Pensioners living in the eventide home in Grange Road, Great Welton, are to have a special holiday this year, thanks to three brave teenagers who did a sponsored parachute jump to raise funds for the old folk. James Dixon, Jane Fairclough and Beth Frampton, all Sixth Form pupils at Great Welton School, did some intensive practice before doing their jumps last Saturday at Overholton airport. “It was much more scary than I expected,” confessed Beth. “But we’d been well trained, and when the ground came rushing up at us, we knew just what to do.” The trio, who became interested in the old people when doing a social studies course last year, plan to accompany them when they spend a week in sunny Devon later this summer.

Although time relationships are clearly specified in this text (“this year,” “last Saturday”) it is obvious that the organising parameter is not chronological order. Rather, the two main events, the parachute jump and the proposed holiday, are presented as causally related: the parachute jump is the means which makes the holiday possible.

These two events constitute the topics, and are introduced in the first sentence. The rest of the text develops the topics in turn, giving details concerning the main participants, and the time and location of each. This is typical of event-oriented informational texts. It seems that we have a strong expectation that certain kinds of information will be provided: our mental topic areas provide a sort of template of associated features, the who, when, and where of the event.

Events are often also traced back to more distant causes (here the social studies course), or are pursued to their anticipated outcome. This is probably not part of the associative template, but an extension of the causally related network, pursuing the purposive chain in both directions.

When the main focus of a news item is an object, the associative template is quite different: shape, size, colour, and function are among the expected features, along with who invented or made them, and other special features such as price, details of manufacture, etc. When people are in focus, there are various templates according to the context; the details reported about a visiting film star are quite different from those provided in an obituary, but both are relatively predictable.

The presentation of already-available facts. Much modern fact-presenting material is published for a very wide audience, with the purpose of making available to them facts which they are already eager to know. There is no need for any interest-arousing devices; the sole requirement is that the facts concerned should be readily accessible. Thus people planning journeys and holidays consult timetables and brochures; students preparing essays study a variety of encyclopaedias; people learning a foreign language have frequent recourse to a dictionary.

These different information-providing texts are organised on different referential frameworks according to the subject-matter. Timetables are presented on a temporo-spatial grid, usually progressing through the day on a horizontal axis, and through space (and time) on the vertical axis. Other information organised spatially includes surveys (e.g., population, employment statistics etc.) and tourist brochures (where to camp, eat out, find ancient sites, etc.). Some material is most accessible when presented alphabetically, while other material is presented by topic area: information on common childhood diseases, for example, might be organised alphabetically for the expert, but would be presented topically (by symptoms and parts of the body) in a home medical manual. The criterion is always ease of access.

13

CONFIGURATIONS: DETERMINING

THE BOUNDARIES

13.1 The nature of configurations

13.2 Referential analysis

13.2.1 Procedures

13.2.2 A sample text: Shellfish

13.3 Purposive analysis

13.3.1 Procedures

13.3.2 A sample text: The Motorist and the Joggers

13.4 Boundary-marking phenomena

13.4.1 Types of boundary signals

13.4.2 Configuration boundaries in the Joggers text

There are very few messages so short that they can be analysed simply in terms of their constituent propositions. Normally a message is divided into major groupings of propositions, realised as chapters or acts or sections in surface structure; these are in turn broken down as often as necessary. These groupings, large and small, are what we are calling configurations; they provide the nesting structures that comprise the internal layers of the message, the smallest of which is itself composed of propositions.

13.1 The nature of configurations

Like all the units and categories studied so far, configurations represent a cognitive reality, a part of our normal thinking processes. If I say to my young son, “What chapter did we get to last night?” his reply may be, for example, “The one where Peter challenges Miraz to single combat.” He needs only a few words to designate a large configuration that takes several printed pages for its expression in English. But that large configuration constitutes a conceptual unity; in terms both of its content, and of its function in the total message, it is clearly distinguishable from adjacent material in the same message and constitutes as it were a message-within-a-message, having an identifiable structure of its own. Moreover, the cognitive capacity to “zoom back” and take a general view, combined with the related ability to pick out prominent from nonprominent material, enables my son to give a succinct summary of the unit he has in mind.

Thus each cognitive configuration exhibits both referential and functional unity and contains both prominent and less prominent material. But we can “zoom in” on the details of referential content and functional significance and find that our configuration subdivides into smaller units. Thus Peter challenging Miraz to single combat can be subdivided into its constituent parts: the decision to issue the challenge, the composing of the challenge, its delivery by official representatives, a period of delay, and the acceptance of the challenge. And these in turn can be subdivided: configurations form successive layerings.

Each configuration, whatever its size, can be distinguished from its neighbours in the same message by having its own distinctive referential content (what it is about) and its own distinctive significance (its function in the larger unit of which it is a part). Internally, a configuration is a patterned structure. It will consist either of smaller configurations or of propositions, and of these some configuration or proposition will normally be more prominent than the rest. It is to these prominent elements that we react when making a summary, since it is these elements which, by definition, carry the most important content in the configuration.

We are calling the central referential material in a configuration its topic, and the central significance-bearing elements its theme. These are obviously closely related, and we will be considering them in chapters 14 and 15 respectively.

First, however, we must tackle the very practical problem of determining the boundaries of the configuration we wish to analyse. The spaces signalling paragraph breaks in printed texts are not wholly reliable guides to the underlying cognitive configurations: sometimes a single printed paragraph realises several underlying configurations; sometimes (perhaps for political or manipulative purposes) the boundaries are deliberately skewed, to disguise from the recipient some evasion or change in thrust and purpose. In any case, many texts (e.g., those in ancient languages) are written without paragraphing, and spoken texts are obviously devoid of such visual signals.

We must therefore learn to divide a text into its constituent parts on the basis of the surface structure signals it provides. Hence we must correlate linguistic signals (both formal and semantic) with the cognitive structures which they realise, the structures which the message sender is endeavouring to communicate to the recipient.

13.2 Referential analysis

13.2.1 Procedures

Since each unit in a text is distinguished from the adjacent units by its referential content and its significance, we want to work with several copies of a text, marking them so as to show up clearly these referential and purposive differences. It is helpful to use coloured marker pens to distinguish different participants, events, or abstract concepts which recur in the text. Since this cannot readily be reproduced here, different type styles, as explained in the box following the Shellfish text (next section), will be used instead.

In a narrative text, major participants should each be marked in a different colour, and minor participants differently again. The appearance and disappearance of different participants often marks configuration boundaries. In the Joggers text, for instance, marked references to the motorist clearly show that this participant is present throughout, so no sub-units can be distinguished in this way. But the three different joggers in the story never occur together: each one seems to participate centrally in a separate sub-unit.

In an expository text, which does not develop by participants-on-a-timeline but by objects/concepts-on-a-themeline, it is helpful to use the same colour for all objects or concepts from the same cognitive area. Then a glance down the page immediately reveals which topics recur throughout, which are suddenly introduced, and so on. A text like Shellfish, which is displayed here, would be marked in several colours, one for everything to do with infections, another for everything to do with shellfish, and a third for the cognitive area of pollution. Such marking would clearly show up the fact that while references to infections and shellfish are found throughout the message, references to pollution do not appear until segment 4, thus making a strong prima facie case for starting a new unit at that point.

13.2.2 A sample text: Shellfish

(1) In Britain in the last decade substantial increases have been seen in infections acquired from uncooked shellfish—

(2) especially cockles and oysters.

(3) These include both gastroenteritis and hepatitis (World Health Organisation Weekly Epidemiological Record 1988; 63:133–4).

(4) The cause (ØØ) is thought to be increasing contamination of estuaries by sewage;

(5) until this pollution is controlled

(6) the conclusion has to be that

(7) “bivalve shellfish cannot be supplied with a guarantee that they are free of virus contamination.”

italics = cognitive area of infections

bold = cognitive area of shellfish

small caps = cognitive area of pollution

Ø = zero realisation of area of infections

Ø = zero realisation of area of shellfish

Several points should be noted in the above working procedure.

First, we are not simply marking repeated words, but repeated concepts. Sometimes a concept is realised by a pronoun or deictic (e.g. “they” in 7), sometimes by specific examples as in 2, sometimes by zero, as in 4, where “the cause” really means “the cause of these increasing infections from shellfish.” Verbal forms are often brief and elliptical, but they are enough to trigger the whole concept in the mind, and the concept is what we are seeking to reveal by colour-marking the text.

Note also that a clustering of coloured markings frequently occurs at the end of a configuration, when the writer is bringing his thoughts to a conclusion. In Shellfish, the only segment marked for all three conceptual areas is the last one.

It is also worth noting any segments not marked for any of the main conceptual areas. This will reveal nonthematic material of different kinds, such as illustrations, comments, asides. In Shellfish the only unmarked segment is 6, which is an authorial signpost.

And a post-script: it should not be thought that there is any great difference between narrative and expository texts as far as analytical techniques are concerned. Although in narrative texts the first step is to trace the participants, the second step is undoubtedly to trace concepts through the text, as has just been done for the Shellfish text. Recurring concepts in the Joggers text are obviously sleep and time. All references relating to sleep should be marked in the same way (“bleary-eyed,” for example, should be included). In connection with time, it might be helpful to distinguish points of time (8 a.m., etc.) from passage of time.

13.3 Purposive analysis

13.3.1 Procedures

Both change of import and change of schematic function determine boundaries. Hence if a text displays different imports as it develops, it should be colour-marked for import. If it is homogeneous as to import, it should be colour-marked for schematic function.

The Daffodil Leaves text, for example, is volitional, but marking it for import will make clear that evaluative and informational elements also occur. Segments 2, 4, 8, 12 and 14 are directive, 5–7 are evaluative, and 15–16 are informational. (The other segments are non-import-bearing, hence unmarked.) This exemplifies a fairly frequent pattern: volitional configurations often end in evaluative or informational material. Thus segments 2–7 form a configuration concerning the cutting back of leaves, with 2–4 providing the instructions and 5–7 the evaluative support for those instructions. The evaluative support terminates the configuration and at the same time constitutes a smaller configuration within the whole. The informational material in 15–16 operates in a similar way in the final configuration concerning unsightliness (13–16).

In texts which are of one import throughout, unit boundaries are often marked by change in schematic function. In the Shellfish text, the unit break between 3 and 4, suggested in section 13.2.1 on referential grounds, is confirmed when we observe that schematic change occurs at the same point. The word “cause” (4) signals that an explanation of the increase in infections is about to be provided: there is a schematic shift from effects to cause.

Longer messages commonly exhibit changes both in import and in schematic function, interwoven with each other. If the two coincide, this is strong evidence for a major boundary.

13.3.2 A sample text: The Motorist and the Joggers

We will illustrate here from the Joggers text. All signals relating to the motorist’s purpose are marked in italics, and all obstacles to the fulfilment of that purpose are marked in bold.

(1) A motorist pulled over on a side street to have a nap.

(2) As he settled down in the seat and closed his eyes,

(3) a jogger rapped on his window to ask the time.

(4) Bleary-eyed, he found his watch

(5) and proclaimed it to be 8 a.m.

(6) Sleeping at last,

(7) he was soon awakened by another jogger rapping on the window.

(8) “Excuse me, sir, do you know the time?” he asked.

(9) Looking at his watch,

(10) he told the man it was 8.30.

(11) At this rate he wasn’t getting much sleep,

(12) so he wrote a short note

(13) and stuck it on the window for all to see.

(14) It stated: “I don’t know the time.”

(15) Again the man settled down for his sorely needed nap.

(16) A few minutes later another jogger came along

(17) and began rapping on the window.

(18) “Hey, mister,” he said, “it’s a quarter to nine.”

In section 13.2.1 it was suggested that because the three joggers never occur together, each relates to a separate sub-unit. This is confirmed here: each appearance of a new jogger (3, 7, 16) correlates with an obstacle to the motorist’s purpose (3, 7–8, 16–18). This provides strong evidence that there are three separate obstacle configurations, the exact boundaries of which will be discussed in 13.4.2.

In addition, there are two places (segments 1 and 11–14) where the only participant is the motorist: these coincide with the statement of the motorist’s purpose (1) and his renewed efforts to achieve that purpose by overcoming the obstacles (11–14). These also, therefore, constitute configurations within the main schematic pattern.

The configurational pattern at which we have now arrived consists of the following elements: motorist’s purpose; obstacle 1, obstacle 2; motorist’s attempt to overcome obstacles; obstacle 3.

13.4 Boundary-marking phenomena

13.4.1 Types of boundary signals

Languages exhibit a great variety of boundary-marking devices: special particles or verb affixes, tone changes, fixed phrases not conforming to normal rules of grammar (“Once upon a time . . .”), unusual word order, use of deictics, etc. Most commonly it is the beginning of a new unit which is so marked, but sometimes a particular verbal signal marks the end of a unit (we tend to end a defiant outburst in English with “And that’s that!”).

Some signals invariably start a new unit, but frequently boundary-marking phenomena are multifunctional. Thus “but” in English can mark the start of a unit, as in Fountains 7 (“But where are they now?”), but it can also operate at a very low level (“a penetrating but kindly gaze”) in which case it does not have a boundary-marking function. The surest guide to unit boundaries is always referential and purposive cohesion within the proposed units, and contrast with adjacent units. This can be seen in the texts analysed in sections 13.2 and 13.3. But strong supporting evidence can be provided by boundary-marking devices; in fact where boundaries are fuzzy or the evidence inconclusive (if, for example, there is a purposive boundary but no referential one), such evidence can be decisive.

We will here illustrate briefly several different categories of boundary-marking signals.

If they occur regularly at or near the beginning of sentences, then particles, connectives and fixed phrases may well signal the start of a new unit. Examples from our texts are “at last” (Joggers 6), “but nevertheless” (Radon 6), and “yet” (Badger 3).

Authorial signposts (section 10.5.2) often signal the start of a new unit. Examples are “There is a better way” (Barefoot 13) and “the conclusion has to be” (Shellfish 6). There are also structural patterns such as sandwich structures, parallelism, and repetitive build-up which have already been noted in the Fountains text (section 11.5.2). Similar structural patterns are found in the Joggers text, which will be further discussed in the next section.

Finally, there is a wide range of boundary phenomena which all involve a change in some major parameter of the message. If a text has been consistently in the present tense and then shifts to the past (e.g., Badger 11), then this is a strong indication of an underlying cognitive change. In the Shellfish text, segments 1–4 deal with a past situation reaching up to the present, whereas segments 5–7 refer to an implied future time of indefinite length (“until this pollution is controlled”). In the Daffodil Leaves text a new unit is signalled by change in actuality status: “If you find the fading bulb leaves unsightly” (13). The Multiple Sclerosis text provides us with an example of change of pace: it starts and finishes with a fairly slow pace (generics such as “high latitudes,” “medical care,” and “racial mix,” occur in 1–2 and 7–9) but between these initial and final sub-units there is a section (3–6) which has a quick pace: the generic “figures” of segment 2 is replaced by several detailed examples such as “34.5 and 75.6 per 100,000” (5); the generic “high latitudes” of segment 1 is replaced by “latitude about 35S” (3) and “latitude 45S” (5). Specific cities are mentioned by name in this central configuration (“Perth,” “Newcastle,” “Hobart”), which in the final, slower section are just referred to as “the three cities” (9).

13.4.2 Configuration boundaries in the Joggers text

In the Joggers text there are several boundary-marking features that confirm the conclusions reached earlier on referential and purposive evidence (see the end of section 13.3 following the display of the text).

The three obstacle configurations are marked by a very strong parallelism: each starts with a reference to sleeping (“closed his eyes” in 2; “sleeping at last” in 6; “sorely needed nap” in 15) and ends with a specific time reference (“8 a.m.” in 5; “8.30” in 10; “a quarter to nine” in 18). These should have appeared quite early in the referential analysis. The attempt-to-overcome-obstacles configuration shows a similar parallelism, with an initial reference to sleep (“wasn’t getting much sleep” in 11) and a final reference to time (“I don’t know the time” in 14). Note that the reference, although generic, is still to clock time, not to the passage of time. The pattern of starting with a reference to sleeping and ending with a reference to time confirms the following configuration boundaries: motorist’s purpose (1); obstacle 1 (2–5); obstacle 2 (6–10); motorist’s attempt to overcome obstacles (11–14); obstacle 3/motorist’s final failure (15–18).

The three obstacle configurations also exhibit internal change of pace. Each starts with a time reference which covers a fairly short but indeterminate period (known from evidence in the later units to be no more than fifteen minutes). This time period is signalled by “as he settled down” (2), “at last” (6), and “a few minutes later” (16). In each case the unit moves on to a much faster pace with the arrival of the jogger and the ensuing brief conversation. Thus the beginning of each unit is marked by a slow pace, and the parallelism already noted is reinforced by this parallelism of slow-followed-by-quick pace.

The configuration in segments 11–14 (the motorist’s attempt to overcome the obstacle) is marked by being different from the rest of the message with respect to its relational base. Instead of the temporal succession which forms the base elsewhere, we here find the associative relations of reason-result (“he wasn’t getting much sleep, so he wrote . . .” in 11–12) and orienter-content (“It stated: ‘I don’t know the time.’” in 14).

So far we have considered the Joggers text solely as an example of a chronologically based text exhibiting a certain schematic pattern. But our analysis is incomplete unless we consider the main point of the story, which is not the motorist’s failure to achieve his purpose, but the humour of the third jogger’s speech in 18. It is characteristic of the subgenre of jokes that the humorous point comes right at the end, hence we are here considering a boundary-phenomenon of a special kind, a message-terminating phenomenon. But as we discuss it, we shall find that it relates to a total schema pattern, a humour schema overlaid on the purpose-(non)fulfilment schema we have just analysed. This humour schema will be found to be applicable to other jokes also.

First, it should be noted that there is nothing humorous in the motorist’s failure as such. If the third jogger had said, “Hey, mister, you’re in a no parking zone!” we might have groaned with sympathy for the driver’s frustration, but we wouldn’t have laughed. In other words, the repetitive nature of the story has built up an expectancy that the culmination will fit into the pattern, established in 2–10, of being connected with time.

But of course the climax of the story must not simply carry on the cumulative progression, it must have a twist—something related to the build-up, yet totally unexpected. Here the unexpected element is found in the final utterance, “it’s a quarter to nine” (18). It is humorous firstly because of the unexpected flip in the role of the jogger, from seeking information to providing it, and humorous even more because of the reason for the jogger’s well-meaning intrusion: he had misinterpreted the motorist’s note.

This brings to our attention another element frequently found in jokes: implications involving the purposive chain. The motorist had intended his message to be understood as “I don’t know the time, so please don’t ask me.” The build-up of 2–10 is such that the reader himself interprets it in that light, and the fact that the jogger pursues the purposive chain differently (“I don’t know the time—please tell me”) becomes apparent only at the very end. Suddenly the reader, pursuing the purposive chain backwards from the jogger’s utterance, realises that the note was ambiguous—and discovered ambiguity is a frequent ingredient in humour.

An important aspect of this kind of humour is that the readers must be left to make the final humorous connection themselves. A final explanation (e.g., “‘That’s not what I meant!’ groaned the motorist”) would have drained all the humour away.

The key elements, therefore, in the humour schema of the Joggers text can be analysed as follows:

2–10 expectation-raising repetitive pattern

14 ambiguity, concealed by above expectation

18 unexpected outcome, traced (by reader) to misinterpretation of hitherto-unrealised ambiguity

14

CONFIGURATIONS: THE TOPIC

14.1 What is a topic?

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14.5.3 The topic and a layered conceptual structure

We turn now to the internal structure of configurations, beginning here with a study of the topic. In chapter 15 we will study the theme, and in chapters 16 and 17 the relations which join the content into a coherent whole.

14.1 What is a topic?

Intuitively, we feel that the topic of a configuration is what it is about, its central referent. Of course, several participants or entities may be referred to in the course of one configuration, but normally only one topic (simple or complex) is dominant throughout. It is not simply that that one is mentioned more frequently or more extensively throughout the unit than the rest. Even a superficial glance at the Multiple Sclerosis text reveals that those two words occur only once in the whole text, right at the beginning. Yet anyone asked what this text was about would almost certainly say multiple sclerosis. The nature of “topicalness” is something of much greater cognitive importance than a frequency count would indicate.

Part of the problem is that “topic” is used in a variety of ways. People use the term informally of the main idea pursued in a communication, be it book, lecture, or conversation. Linguists talking of the topic of a clause or sentence mean specific words or phrases, not ideas. In this book we are using the term of the prominent conceptual material in a message. Use of the term differs, therefore, both as to the scope of a topic (clause level or message level) and as to its nature (whether verbal or conceptual, and whether or not prominence is involved).

So we must start by saying what we do mean, and what we do not mean, by this term. By “topic” we mean conceptual material which is of central importance throughout a unit—what a unitary stretch of text is primarily about. We shall see that this important material is quite complex in its functions and in the way it is signalled, but in all its varied manifestations it will be found to be always referential (about some unitary thing or situation), always important (by comparison with the rest of the unit), and always extensive (occurring several times throughout a stretch of text).

What we do not mean by “topic” is an element that occurs in only one clause, or a surface-structure representation such as an initial noun phrase, a definite noun phrase, or a front-shifted phrase. A phrase like “the next day” is a definite noun phrase, and if it occurs at the beginning of a unit, it is also initial and front-shifted, but it is not likely to signal the topic of the unit, being neither important nor extensive. By contrast, an initial phrase such as “the next competitor” or “the next attempt” is much more likely to represent a higher-level topic. There is no one-to-one relationship between the topic and either the forms signalling it, or the position of those forms in the sentence.

There is no doubt, however, that what has traditionally been called the sentence topic has an important function, quite different from that of higher-level topics. Unlike the latter, a sentence topic is not necessarily prominent. In “He suddenly spotted a brightly-coloured snake not two feet away,” the sentence topic is “he,” but the person concerned is much less prominent than the snake. Nor is it very convincing to say that “he” is what the sentence is about—most people would say it was about a snake. But although the sentence topic cannot be correlated directly with either prominence or “aboutness” it has a crucial role in message structure. It acts as the adhesive that glues the clause content to exactly the right spot in the conceptual model of the message being constructed by the recipient. (It is “he” who saw the snake, and none other.) This correct locating of new material is the essential function performed by the traditional sentence topic.

From this point on, we will be using the term “topic” only in its higher-level sense of a concept that is referential, important, and extensive.

14.2 The functions of a topic

Much of the confusion noted above arises because the topic of any configuration is operating with two simultaneous functions, which are related but different. With respect to the reader’s processing of the message, the topic functions as the major load-bearing element in the conveying and assimilating of new information. With respect to the structure of the message as a whole, the topic functions as the major prominence-bearing element in its interrelated patterns. It is not difficult to see that the same referential concept can have, and indeed must have, the two functions at the same time. What is being constantly talked about in a message (by constantly having new material related to it) must inevitably play a prominent role in its structural patterns: it is just not possible to have concepts which are prominently talked about in the structure, yet hardly ever have new information attached to them. Hence we are not talking about two different kinds of topic, but of one topic under two different aspects, one topic functioning in two dimensions simultaneously.

(Some readers may be thinking, “This cannot be so. We have just seen that multiple sclerosis is mentioned only once in its text. Yet it is undoubtedly the prominent concept.” I would remind them that we are here, as ever, talking about concepts in the head, not about words on the page. The words “multiple sclerosis” occur only once: the concept occurs frequently (see section 14.3.3).)

The first of the two topic functions is obvious: if a message is to be communicated at all, new material must be presented during the course of the unit and must be constantly woven into the already familiar material. Without new material, there is no significant message at all; without familiar material to build on, comprehension of the new is not possible. At any point in the reception of the developing message, therefore, the recipient has cognitive material available as a matrix into which to plug the new message elements he receives. The most prominent and constant elements in this matrix constitute the topic. This is what the recipient is expected to hold in readiness as a relational centre point for new material. And this plug-in point is not constantly being replaced, for in that case rational thought would be impossible. The centre point for new material remains stable throughout a stretch of text; in this way it fulfils its first function as the central load-bearing element to which new information is (successively) attached.

The second function of the topic, its prominence-bearing function, is related to the structural patterns in the message, which are based either on its schema or on its associative relations. In either case, some of the referential material is more prominent than the rest. This prominent material is what carries the schematic or associative patterns: a schema-bearing unit does not consist solely of a problem or a validation in the abstract, there are concepts involved which constitute that problem or validation. Those concepts which carry the schema relations (the participant who is attempting to solve the problem, the unexplained event for which an explanation is required) are the most prominent concepts in the relevant stretch of text.

But it must also be obvious that it is these same concepts to which new concepts are being attached as the message progresses. The one topic has dual function. (In the rest of this chapter we will be treating primarily the information-bearing function of topical material. The prominence-bearing function will be covered in the next chapter on theme.)

14.3 The signalling of a topic

The topic of a configuration is a concept which, whether it is signalled overtly or indirectly, or even by zero, is conceptually present throughout the whole unit. Those who like language to be very tidy may at this point be more than a little uneasy. Without one-to-one correspondence with surface-structure signals, how are we to identify a topic at all? But this is to give up rather too easily: surface-structure signals abound, even though without mathematical predictability.

A message sender signals his topic overtly just as often as he needs to in order to get his message across. Normally, clear initial signals are given, and then the topic is frequently referred to using surface-structure forms appropriate in the particular language. If there is a gap during which something else is talked about, the topic will need to be reactivated if it is taken up again. Specific surface-structure forms will be available for signalling “return to former topic.”

14.3.1 How a topic is introduced

A glance at our sample texts will show that topics are introduced in a wide variety of ways. In the Shellfish text, the first sentence provides a setting (“In Britain in the last decade”) followed by a generic statement of the topic (“substantial increases . . . in infections from uncooked shellfish”). This is followed by specifics of the major elements in the topic, namely, shellfish (“cockles and oysters”) and infections (“gastroenteritis and hepatitis”).

It is not uncommon for a topic to be introduced by a question. In the Daffodil Leaves text, a question was posed by a reader to a gardening columnist: “How soon can I cut the leaves off my daffodils?” The topical material is indicated in the main content of the question, while the specific point to be developed is indicated in the initial question phrase “How soon?,” thus giving a hint of the theme also. Notice that the rest of the question, apart from the question word, is assumed to be readily accessible information. Gardeners do not need to be told that daffodil leaves require cutting back.

In the Multiple Sclerosis text, also, the topic is introduced as already accessible and accepted. This is done overtly: “Multiple sclerosis is known to occur more frequently in high latitudes.” This solves the problem of a wide-ranging audience, all of whom would have heard of multiple sclerosis, but some of whom would not have heard of the correlation with latitude. While serving as a reminder to those who already know of the correlation, it simultaneously establishes it for the others as a fact to be assumed as agreed upon for the purposes of this particular message.

Two other texts introduce their topics in ways that are less usual, and of considerable interest. The Radon text starts, “As many as 20,000 Americans may be dying each year from lung cancer caused by radon.” It might be thought from this that the topic was “20,000 Americans,” but in fact they are only mentioned once in the rest of the text, and that indirectly. The topic is radon as a cause of lung cancer. But the word “radon” is abstract, impersonal, and not even well known to all readers, hence there would be very little audience appeal in a text that started “Radon, the radioactive gas emitted by rocks such as granite.” The solution is to provide audience appeal first (“As many as 20,000 Americans . . . dying”) and to introduce the topic (“lung cancer caused by radon”) in a complex nominal phrase at the end of the first clause. This has the advantage of starting with readily available concepts; less accessible ones come later. To a medical audience, the concept of people dying is a readily accessible one; the concepts of gases, rocks, and granite are much less so.

The Barefoot text is also interesting. The other texts either state the topic at the start, or state it generically and follow up with specifics. The Barefoot text, on the other hand, starts with several specifics in rapid succession, introduced by “In Bolivia . . . ; in parts of Brazil . . . ; in some areas of Nigeria . . . ; in Cameroon . . .” One specific by itself is rarely adequate for establishing a topic; if the Bolivia example had been the only one mentioned, the anticipated topic might have been malnutrition, or infant mortality, or Bolivia itself. The addition of the other specifics makes it clear that the topic is wider than that. It is not stated overtly and generically until segment 6. But by introducing the topic in this way the writer is simply making use of the cognitive facts underlying communication: specifics serve to foreground the conceptual area they belong to just as surely as generics do—and people tend to be more interested in specifics.

14.3.2 Units without an overt topic

Although all our sample texts exhibit clearly discernible topics, it is not impossible to have a configuration in which the topic is not overtly introduced at all. This happens when the message sender, as he monitors the recipient’s conceptual awareness, considers that the recipient already has the appropriate material foregrounded and does not need any of the signals to be reactivated. This occurs, of course, much more commonly in conversation than in written material. If a mother sees her small son about to put salt in the visitor’s coffee or conduct experiments with the neighbour’s goldfish, she need only say, “Don’t you dare!” The concepts involved are clearly foregrounded already: to signal them verbally is superfluous.

In written materials it is normal to provide topic material overtly. Nevertheless, the need for this can be considerably diminished if the unit concerned is not the first in the message, and if the preceding units have already served to foreground all the referential material that is required. This material is assumed as the plug-in matrix of the new unit, and it is possible to retrieve this covert topic from the communication as it proceeds.

Such topical continuity from one unit to the next is normally found only in nonthematic, nonsalient units (since a new thematic unit usually starts with a new topic) or in cases where one long referential configuration is divided into subunits purposively. (If, for instance, we say that the topic of the Badger text is simply badgers, then the whole text would provide an example of a referential unity purposively divided. It seems truer to the cognitive facts and the textual evidence, however, to consider that the topic badgers is developed throughout the text in a variety of ways (see section 14.5.2.))

Sometimes no topic is mentioned initially because it is gradually built up in the reader’s mind by a series of specific details, all relating to one common conceptual area. An example of this has already been seen in the first configuration of the Barefoot text, where an overt topic is drawn out of the specifics at the end of the unit (in 6). It is possible, however, to have a generic topic which is signalled only by its specifics. Imagine, for instance, a paragraph configuration concerning a garden, in which the description ranges over lawns, flower beds, a pond, a vegetable plot, etc. The word “garden” need never be mentioned at all. The paragraph could begin, “She glanced through the window. The roses were in bloom outside, and the shadows of late afternoon were creeping across the lawn . . .” Only specifics are mentioned, but clearly no single one of them constitutes the topic. Rather, any reader would be relating those specifics to a conceptually present garden.

We should not be surprised, therefore, if we occasionally come across units with no identifiable formal topic in the surface structure. Cognitively, such a topic will always be present, whether indirectly signalled in the content or continued from earlier units.

14.3.3 How a topic is traced

A topic may be signalled in many different ways as it is developed in the course of a configuration. This causes less problem than might be supposed, provided the analyst bears in mind that wherever the writer obviously means the topical concept, it is considered to be conceptually present, even if the surface-structure signal is minimal or zero.

The sample texts provide us with a wide selection of topic-tracing signals. The Shellfish text has as its topic the increase in infections acquired from shellfish. Infections are referred to later in the text by a deictic, “these” in 3, by specifics, “gastroenteritis and hepatitis” in 3, and by zero in 4, where “The cause” stands for the cause of this increase in such infections. The example in 4 shows the value of having an established topic which is then understood as the plug-in point for new material, rather than having to spell it out in full each time.

The Radon text is perhaps typical of scientific messages, but untypical of messages in general, in that references throughout the text are made by repetition. The term “radon” is used three times, excluding the topic-establishing mention of it in 2. There are no pronominal references, indeed no other references at all except the synonymous phrase provided by the definition “the radioactive gas emitted by rocks such as granite” in 3.

Another topic-signalling device in our texts is the use of synonyms. In the Joggers text, “the man” occurs twice, once referring to the motorist (15) and once to one of the joggers (10). In Daffodil Leaves the “six weeks” of segment 2 is referred to in segment 5 as “this period.” In the Fountains text, “Fountains” in segment 1 is taken up in 7 by the phrase “these magical jets of water.”

There is often a partial realisation of the topic standing for the whole. In the Multiple Sclerosis text, the topic is indicated right at the beginning as the frequency of occurrence of multiple sclerosis at high latitudes. As we trace this topic through the text we find that it is only the frequency of occurrence element that is realised in surface structure (“prevalence rates” in 3; “these” in 4; “the rates” in 5). Yet clearly the prevalence rates referred to are those of multiple sclerosis at high latitudes; the partial signal draws the mind back to the full topic.

This text raises two other points of interest. The first is the use of zero as a signal. In segment 6 “the increase between 1961 and 1981” means the increase in the frequency of occurrence of multiple sclerosis at high latitudes. (Small wonder that a shorthand approach is considered preferable!) Here, although no part of the complex topic is verbally present, the whole of it is conceptually present. Reading on, we find this topic conceptually present, although unsignalled, at several further points. “Better diagnosis” (6) means, not any kind of diagnosis, but the better diagnosis of multiple sclerosis; “geographical differences” refers to only one kind of difference, differences in the prevalence rates of multiple sclerosis with respect to latitude. The words “increase” and “differences” are so generic that, in isolation, they trigger very little mental content. But in this context a full conceptual content has already been established for them, the content just mentioned. The word comes to the mind of the reader (as indeed it left the mind of the writer) already suffused with the content of the established topic. It thus triggers that entire topic and would have virtually no meaning, certainly no relevant meaning, without it.

Strictly speaking, it could be misleading to speak of “triggering” the topic, for this might give the impression that the established topical concepts were constantly popping in and out of our minds, appearing only when called for. It would be more accurate to say that in the minds of writer and reader the topic is permanently present, until replaced by another topic. (If we hear something which we don’t quite understand, we grope mentally to fit it in with the already established topic: the topic is clearly present, even although the connection has momentarily failed.) Thus the apparent “jerkiness” of topic take-up, the fact that there are gaps between the occurrences of a topic in texts, belongs more to the realm of the analyst than to the realm of the participants in a communication. A communicator’s purpose in establishing a topic is to provide the reader with a continuously available base into which to weave new concepts.

The other point of interest in this text is that, as we mentioned earlier, most people would consider its topic to be multiple sclerosis. Yet the surface-structure evidence shows that the topic is more complex than this—that it is the prevalence element in the topic which is realised most frequently. Why does the common reaction not match the evidence?

The common reaction is, in fact, soundly based: frequency of overt occurrence is not the only factor to be considered. To say that a text was about prevalence would be, to say the least, unrevealing. This highlights for us the cognitive fact that prevalence is an inherently incomplete concept. Something—some state or situation or experience—must be present conceptually, to which the concept prevalence attaches, without which it fails to satisfy our first criterion of being referential (section 14.1). In this instance, the concept multiple sclerosis is already present, and prevalence attaches to it.

14.4 Identifying the topic in a text or configuration

In the previous section on how topics are signalled, we assumed that for each text we already knew what the topic was. But identifying a topic is not always a straightforward matter.

It would be relatively easy to establish the topic in a unit if we could just rely on the title or headline identifying the main characters or objects involved. Daffodil Leaves and Shellfish sound quite appropriate as topics, and they are certainly more memorable than the longer versions we are suggesting. But such brief headings do no more than signal the category of object involved; this is quite adequate for a title, but not at all adequate for a topic if this is to be, as we have been insisting, a cognitive reality relating to the developing message.

When we recognise the need to have cognitively adequate topics, the question immediately arises as to how much to include in the topic. If it can consist of several concepts in a complex unity, what concepts are included in the topic, and what are excluded?

To illustrate the criteria to be applied in assessing topicality, we will consider the topic of the Shellfish text in detail.

First, of course, we exclude from topical status the first two phrases of the text, “In Britain” and “in the last decade.” These phrases simply provide settings for the message as a whole.

Now, the place and time referred to are relevant throughout the whole of the message, so they are certainly extensive features. They also refer to a specific space and time, so they are about something, they are referential. Why, then, do we not consider them topical? What is the difference between a setting and a topic? This should be clear from our earlier discussions: the setting is not central to the message. It has no important part to play in either the information structure or its purposive development. Referentially, the message is not about Britain or the last decade, it is simply located there. And although that country and time span are relevant throughout the message, they never recur as such. No new concept is ever plugged directly into them. They delimit the general conceptual area of the message but in no way control its organisation.

We take the topic of the Shellfish text to be the increase in infections acquired from shellfish. This is derived from the initial sentence of the unit which, if we omit settings and specifics, reads, “. . . substantial increases have been seen in infections acquired from uncooked shellfish.” The inclusion of infections and shellfish is readily justified by later thematic mentions: but why include increase in the topic, and yet exclude uncooked since neither is mentioned again?

The justification for including increase derives both from the meaning of the text and from its surface structure. Although the increase in infections, as distinct from the infections themselves, is not mentioned again overtly, it is cognitively present when “the cause” is mentioned—it means the cause, not of the infections, but of the increase in infections, as evidenced by the parallel “increasing contamination.” Moreover, the schema of the configuration is mystery/problem-explanation-(non)solution. The fact that the implicit increase is an essential part of the explanation (i.e. of a schema unit) is adequate grounds for including it in the topic.

There is also a grammatical reason for considering increase as part of the topic. The noun phrase “substantial increases” is the subject of the passive verb “have been seen,” and passives are not used indiscriminately in English. The sentence might, instead, have read, “. . . infections acquired from uncooked shellfish have increased substantially.” But the deliberate use of the passive topicalises “increases,” giving it greater initial prominence than either “infections” or “shellfish.”

But why exclude uncooked from the topic? There are only two other mentions of shellfish in the text, one the specific “cockles and oysters” (2) and the other “bivalve shellfish” in the conclusion (7). The first instance undoubtedly refers to the uncooked state, and the second probably does (though this is more arguable, depending on who the supplier is: fishermen or wholesalers would certainly supply the uncooked commodity; restaurant owners might or might not). But on the whole it seems that it is uncooked shellfish which are envisaged throughout, so why not count that element as topical? The main reason is that cooked versus uncooked is not under attention. If the conclusion had been “bivalve shellfish should be thoroughly cooked before consumption,” then the cooking factor would have had topical status. As it is, the focus is on the likelihood of contamination, not on its removal. The concept uncooked, therefore, is not topical, although available; none of the later material relates to it directly.

The Shellfish text is a very compact one, and its topic is both complex and comprehensive. It is not surprising, therefore, that almost every concept activated throughout relates very closely to that topic. It must not be thought, however, that this is usually the case. Concepts may relate to the topical core indirectly as well as directly. In fact we have an example of this in the Shellfish text itself: segment 5 reads “until this pollution is controlled.” Here pollution stands in causal relation to the topic, as is made clear in segment 4, but controlled has no direct relation to increases or infections or shellfish. Rather, it relates directly to pollution, and hence indirectly to the infections caused by that pollution.

There are degrees of connectedness to a topic. The normal pattern of a text is analogous to the structure of a tree. The topic is the trunk, but not all the branches are directly attached to the trunk. Rather, a few main branches spring from the trunk, and smaller branches and twigs attach to these. The twigs are by no means independent of the trunk simply because they are at a distance from it. Similarly, conceptual twigs are dependent on the topical trunk, in a relationship which can be traced, and without which the text would be in chaos. We will consider such relationships in the next three chapters.

14.5 How a topic develops

Some analysts do not think of a topic as developing at all. Those who identify the topic with one single word, or with one repeated word, in a text, tend as a result to think of a topic as a static thing, something which is established at the beginning of a unit and remains unchanged until that unit ends.

Our thoughts, however, never stay still. They may wander, as in undirected daydreams, or they may follow a highly controlled path, as when we read a text, but they are always moving on. As a concept moves through the message, and is related to other concepts, it develops. The other concepts add colour and body to it, change our attitude to it, and enhance its significance, even though it is essentially the “same” topic which is referred to throughout.

14.5.1 The topic and a changing situation

A topic may undergo several different kinds of change in the course of a message. First, it may change and develop simply because the conceptualised object or situation has changed or developed. If at tea-time I offer my husband shortbread and he says, “How about another slice of that nice chocolate cake?,” he is thinking of a particular cake, but a cake no longer whole: he has already had some slices from it. He is thinking of the original cake, but with a wedge-shaped gap in it. If I reply, “I’m sorry, we ate the last two slices when Maisie was here yesterday,” then I am thinking of a no-longer-existing cake, a cake which has disappeared slice by slice and is now gone. The chocolate cake is the topic throughout, but it has changed.

Sometimes a topic consists of an inherently developing activity or situation. A commentator reporting the Oxford and Cambridge boat race, for instance, has that race as his topic from beginning to end, but it is only at the end that we know who won. We talk about “the new building” when it is still only lines on a piece of paper; we consider that we are talking about the same building at the opening ceremony a year later.

It should be clear from these examples that we do not expect our thoughts to be static: it causes us no mental uneasiness whatsoever to activate one concept in relation to changing states. Concepts can maintain their identity even as they develop.

Another situation where identity-in-variation can be readily seen is in a long text such as a novel. The Frodo who returns home at the end of The Lord of the Rings is a very different hobbit from the one who left it at the start of the adventure. Throughout the novel he is the main character, the Ring-bearer—but that is to take the bird’s-eye view, the analyst’s view. The reader has rather been relating each new bit of information, not to the overall Frodo, nor to the initial Frodo, but to the current Frodo, journeying or resting, sick or recovered, and so forth. Not only do we handle a developing topic with ease, we expect it to develop. Otherwise, why introduce it at all?

14.5.2 The topic and a developing schema

We said in section 14.3.2 that the topic badgers in the Badger text is developed throughout the text; it is more than just a reference to the animal. But what is the nature of this development? It is closely related, not to a changing situation, but to the writer’s purpose and the resultant schema.

Badgers are introduced in segment 1 in a very favourable light. Segments 1 and 2 constitute an expressive configuration the purpose of which is to convince the readers that badgers are worth saving. By the time we reach segment 3 we are already thinking of badgers in this very positive way.

In the latter part of segment 3 a new element is introduced: badgers are endangered. This new conceptual element is reinforced by the use of the word “predator” (4), even while the contrasting “harmless creatures” continues the favourable attitude of the first configuration.

By the end of segment 4, then, we are aware of badgers as worth saving and as endangered. In 6–10 the topic is developed further: the badger is the subject of legislation—inadequate legislation. By the time we learn, in segment 11, of the campaign launched by the League, we are already thinking of badgers, not as furry animals with black and white faces, but as creatures in danger, being slaughtered in large numbers, yet highly deserving of compassion and protection.

This build-up has been quite deliberate. Anyone presented out of the blue with a request for money for the League might well say, “Why should I? What are badgers to me? How would you use the money anyway?” The development of the topic pre-empts these questions, and ensures that the appeal falls on prepared conceptual soil.

This text not only shows how a single topic can be deliberately developed to suit the writer’s purpose. It also illustrates a cognitive fact of some importance: it is almost impossible for us to think of anything in isolation, to think of badgers as simply being badgers without any details. Whatever topic we choose is always presented in a particular light, under a certain aspect, and each new fact attached to it either develops that aspect or initiates a new one.

14.5.3 The topic and a layered conceptual structure

We come now to the consideration of how different topics in the same text relate to each other. In the Barefoot text we find three main schematic elements prior to the final summary. Clearly, each of these configurations has its own separate topic, which may be stated roughly as One third of humanity is in dire need (1–6); First World aid has made things worse (7–12); small-scale projects are better (13–19).

Yet the topics are not totally independent. The topic of 7–12 and the topic of 13–19 would make little sense unless the reader had the topic of 1–6 foregrounded in his mind. This is to say no more than the obvious: what is said later assumes what has been said earlier; a text is built up layer by layer.

But this carries some implications which we do well to remember. First, topics may contain assumed material. If we look again at configuration 7–12, its suggested topic, First World aid has made things worse, seems inadequate. Aid to whom, and why? What “things” have been made worse? The suggested version made sense only because these factors were assumed from 1–6. In other words, what is said in the first configuration is conceptually present—not just available, but actually present in some sense—in the reader’s mind, at the start of the next configuration. The topic of 7–12 would be more accurately stated as “First World aid (to Third World nations) (to help them solve their problems) has made (those problems) worse.” The elements in parentheses are those assumed from the earlier configuration.

Second, and more important, when a message is being communicated, conceptual structures are being built up by the message sender in the mind of the recipient. Early parts of the message remain in the memory as incomplete structures while the message continues; later parts of the message would be incomprehensible if this were not so. (Tolkien’s third volume could be only partially understood if the characters and events of the first two volumes had already disappeared from ready access.) This is not to say that the partially completed structures are consciously under attention, but they are there in place, undergirding and supplying the rest of the message. All communication depends on such undergirding structures, often recent as here, sometimes in long-term memory. It would be impossible without them.

We should not, then, simply think of the topic as the central core to which new information attaches, directly or indirectly. This is only part of the picture. Via the topic, each new element in the message finds a place in the conceptual structure which is being built up. The mind seems to have no difficulty in coping with several “layers” of information at once—the partially completed conceptual structures, the current topic, and the concepts now under attention relating to that topic.

15

CONFIGURATIONS: THE THEME

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15.1 Theme as a cognitive reality

In the giving and receiving of messages, we build up mental structures consisting of units within units, and we associate with these units their most prominent features. We can think of the units (chapter or paragraph configurations, etc.) as distinct from each other without having to recall every detail. We can recall the prominent material without having to attend to the rest.

This was brought home to me vividly one day when a colleague, bilingual in English and Spanish, was asked by a Latin American student to explain some points which he had not understood in an English-language lecture which they had both been attending. My colleague complied and went over the main points of the lecture with him in some detail, in Spanish. It seems obvious that in doing so he was not translating from a lecture that he had memorised in English after one hearing. Rather, he was re-expressing in Spanish inwardly stored structures that had been built up via English, but in conceptual form. Moreover, he did not have to repeat the whole lecture in order to explain it: his conceptualisation obviously distinguished between prominent and less prominent material, and it was only the former which he used in his explanation.

This was confirmed a few minutes later, when the English-speaking lecturer came along. My friend turned to him, and in a few sentences summarised in English the explanation which he had just been giving in Spanish. Once more, it is obvious that he was not translating anything. As he was giving his Spanish explanation his mind had been storing the mental structures he was expressing; he had stored them with the prominent material so accessible that he was able to express that and that alone in his English summary.

Now, if speakers build up their messages around such a prominent core, and if listeners and readers can retrieve this central material from the message they are receiving, it follows that there must be signals of such prominence in the surface structure. There must be some way in which the message sender makes clear the main thrust of his message, and this must make it possible for the recipient to store prominent material differently from the less prominent parts of the message, for later retrieval.

The prominent core of the developing message is its theme. (A message without development, e.g., a description with its constituent parts organised in associative relations, has a topic, but no theme.) In this chapter we will attempt to uncover the facts about meaning structure which underlie our intuitive recognition of thematic prominence.

Thematic prominence is signalled both grammatically and lexically: neither alone is sufficient to establish the theme. Normally, for example, thematic material is carried in independent clauses, but this is not invariably the case. Sometimes independent clauses are not thematic. Barefoot 11 (“the Aswan Dam prevented silt from flowing to the Nile Delta”) and Badger 22 (“And we’ll be glad to send you our special enamel badge”) are cases in point. On the other hand, the theme is sometimes realised in subordinate clauses. Segments 7, 8, and 9 of Radon are recursively subordinate but undoubtedly thematic.

Theme is a universal phenomenon, found in all languages. We are therefore looking for factors in meaning structure which define themes, factors which are independent of the particular language used to express them. Once these are established it should be possible to determine, for any given language, what surface forms are used to convey thematic material of different kinds. But our task here is not to discover surface-structure signals of themes; rather, it is to elucidate what a theme is.

15.2 Theme as purposive and prominent

The theme of a configuration is not simply its most prominent, or important, material. The theme is prominent material which moves the message forward towards the communicator’s goal. It is the framework of message development. The communicator plans beforehand what he will say, not in detail, but in broad outline. He plans to achieve a certain end and to do so in a certain way. It is on this planned line of development that he constructs his message as he presents it. This line of development is what we are calling the theme. The unfolding thematic content is a cognitive reality to the addressee also, who needs it in order to locate incoming parts of the message correctly within the whole.

The theme relates closely to purposive or schema relations (see chapter 12). Different parts of the theme stand in schematic relationship to each other, with relationships such as directive-motivation, thesis-evidence, and purpose-fulfilment. The term “theme” is a useful one, and a historically respectable one, for material related in this way.

But theme is not simply a set of relationships. It has content. The theme of a configuration consists of that prominent referential material in the unit which carries its purposive thrust. Since in any configuration the referential material is organised as relating directly or indirectly to the topic, it is obvious that the theme of a configuration will include the topic as its referential base. To the material provided by the topic we must add whatever other prominent material carries the message forward in that unit.

It is not only the total message which has a theme. Configurations within it can each have their own theme; the message exhibits a layering of themes within themes, the lower-level themes contributing to the prominence and purposive development of the main one.

15.3 Theme in different text types

It is not always easy in practice to decide what is thematic and what is not. Chronologically organised texts have always seemed easier to analyse in this respect, since the timeline of successive events provides a natural framework for the text, and it is generally easy to tell whether a particular clause represents a timeline event or not. But while it is useful to be able to say that an off-the-timeline event is not thematic, it cannot be said correspondingly that because an event is on the timeline, it thereby has thematic status. Sometimes it does not. It is possible for an event to be on the timeline and yet to have low prominence value. So the concept of a timeline does not in itself account for thematicity in this kind of text.

Some texts, of course, are not arranged along a timeline at all, but along some other parameter, usually provided by the causal relations discussed in chapter 16. Here we could appropriately talk about a “themeline” instead of a timeline.

To establish the theme of a text we need clear criteria. We here suggest a practical approach that has proved useful in the analysis of widely varying languages; it is a two-pronged approach, consisting of excluding certain material from thematic status for specific reasons, while at the same time including other material as thematic, again for specific reasons. The criteria involved are essentially the same for themeline and timeline texts, but the differing relational infrastructure means that the prominence patterns of the two are quite different. We will apply the criteria—the same criteria in the same order—first to a themeline text (Shellfish, section 15.4) and then to a timeline text (Joggers, section 15.5).

15.4 Establishing the theme of a themeline text

15.4.1 Identifying the prominent content

Referential material may be prominent, and therefore a candidate for thematicity, for a variety of reasons. (Prominent material is not automatically thematic: low level prominence may have purely local relevance. Prominence signals must be assessed in their context to determine their thematic status.)

15.4.1.1 Schematic prominence

Referential material may fulfil a schematic role. This is the main criterion for establishing the theme. As a first step, then, we seek to establish the schema of a text or configuration, including in the theme all material which clearly has a schematic function and excluding from it that which does not. In practice we will probably find a residue, the status of which seems initially uncertain. Indeed, our final decision may depend on just how detailed we want our theme to be, depending on the purpose of our analysis. But this first step should, without any other criteria, determine the status of the greater part of our text.

In the Shellfish text there is a double schema: mystery-explanation and problem-(non)solution. The mystery and the problem are presented simultaneously in segment 1: “substantial increases have been seen in infections acquired from uncooked shellfish.” We therefore take this as thematic.

The mystery finds its explanation in 4: “the cause is thought to be increasing contamination of estuaries by sewage.” The problem (how to prevent such infections) is not resolved, but the fact that there is as yet no solution is stated in 7: “bivalve shellfish cannot be supplied with a guarantee that they are free of virus contamination.”

These three schema-bearing elements from segments 1,4, and 7, constitute our initial attempt at establishing the theme. The other elements are considered nonthematic.

15.4.1.2 Relational prominence

All referential units stand in referential or presentational relations with respect to other units at the same hierarchical level. In other words, everything we talk about must relate in some meaningful way to the other things that we are talking about. Unrelated units do not make sense. But many of the relations carry an inbuilt prominence: results are more prominent than reasons, illustrations are less prominent than what they are illustrating.

In general, any proposition that operates in a nonprominent (supporting) role can be excluded from the theme. Thus, in Daffodil Leaves, we would exclude from thematic status the propositions realised in 5–7 (“This period is essential to rebuild foodstores,” etc.) because it has the supporting role of a reason for the activity in 2–4.

Where relational prominence coincides with schematic prominence there is no problem in establishing the material as thematic. This is regularly the case with volitional and evaluative material: the message sender is organising his material along a generally logical parameter—giving grounds for his evaluations or reasons for certain behaviour. It is common, for example, that material which is relationally a reason is schematically motivation for the more prominent directive (the directive being the envisaged result). The two kinds of prominence reinforce each other.

In the Shellfish text, segments 5 and 7 stand in relationship to each other as condition-consequence. The condition carries less prominence than the consequence (lowercase letters indicate the less prominent element in the relation and small capitals the more prominent). This confirms the prominence of segment 7 already derived from schematic criteria.

15.4.1.3 Topical prominence

The issue of prominent content acting as topic occupied us in the previous chapter. We can now apply this usefully to the analysis of theme. For example, in the Shellfish text, we have already seen (section 14.4) that “uncooked” in segment 1 is to be excluded from the topic on the grounds that no concepts later in the text relate directly to it. For the same reason, we now exclude it from the theme, thus trimming down our initial version (“substantial increases have been seen in infections acquired from uncooked shellfish”). Apart from this, all elements identified as topical appear repeatedly, as we would expect, in the theme.

15.4.1.4 Special prominence

Sometimes material that has a supporting role relationally is given special or marked prominence. Suppose I say to a child, “I won’t let you go there again, because you disobeyed me last time.” Here the naturally prominent element is that realised in the main clause. But I might say instead, “It’s because you disobeyed me last time that I won’t let you go there again.” In this case the relationship is still the same (disobedience being still the reason for the prohibition), but the prominence is switched: it is now the reason, not the result, that is prominent. Material given special prominence in this way is a strong candidate for thematic status.

An example of this is found in the Radon text: the propositions underlying the last clause are in a grounds relationship with the preceding material—there has been much concern about a certain lipstick dye on the grounds that it might possibly cause cancer. But these grounds are introduced by unusual punctuation, which indicates an unusual intonation and timing in the spoken equivalent and brings the cancer-causing potential into special prominence. (With the normal punctuation, a comma or no punctuation mark at all, this material would have been nonprominent.) Considered as prominent, it forms a sandwich structure with the introductory phrase, which is a further indication in English of probable thematic significance: the theme for this configuration will have to include the contrast between the many deaths probably caused by radon and the few deaths possibly caused by the lipstick dye.

The Shellfish text has no example of support material raised to thematicity by special prominence, but the final segment, already noted as thematic, is given a degree of special prominence by the “signpost” segment that precedes it: (“the conclusion has to be that”). In such instances, the signpost itself is not prominent, but the element pointed to is. This, then, confirms the thematic status of segment 7. Its final position also confers on it a degree of prominence, bearing out our conclusion.

15.4.2 Identifying nonthematic content

It might seem that once we have established the theme, our work is done. But in fact we have considered only half the evidence: the recipient of a message reacts not only to signals of prominence, but also to signals of nonprominence. Material which is to be stored in conceptual structures not in its own right, but dependent on other material, is clearly signalled as such. Non-thematic material should be established on the basis of firm criteria, as was done in establishing the theme. It should not depend on the analyst’s hunch.

15.4.2.1 Support by orientation

Some supporting material in a text is clearly orienting in nature (section 17.2). It stands aside from the message proper and provides material that enables the recipient to locate the message in the right conceptual area and understand its significance. In the Shellfish text, the source cited in segment 3 obviously stands aside from the rest of the text, as does the setting in segment 1 (“In Britain in the last decade”).

A common type of orienting material is the authorial signpost, where the writer steps so to speak into the message to make a comment on it. Such signposts have already been noted in Barefoot 13 and 20; they do not form part of the message content, but point clearly to stages in its schematic development. Other authorial comments relate, not to the schematic significance, but to the truth value of what follows, as in Shellfish 4 (“is thought to be”). Like all orienting material, this is nonthematic.

15.4.2.2 Support by association

The term “association” covers all the associative relations listed in section 17.1 in which one member of the pairing stands in a supporting relationship to the other: equivalence, classification, amplification, and comparison. A statement can be supported by a restatement in other words (equivalence), by specific examples (classification), by the addition of details (amplification), or by an illustration (comparison). In all these cases the associative relation signals the supporting element as nonthematic. This seems, indeed, intuitively obvious, since thematic material moves the message forward, while supporting material does not: it has other functions.

Segments 2 and 3a of the Shellfish text are each in an associative support relation to what precedes them. This confirms their nonthematic status. (Note, however, the comments immediately following the text in 15.4.3).

15.4.2.3 Support by modification and intensification

Also excluded from thematicity are any modifications or intensifications, details which do not contribute to the development of the message. They may add vividness, provide corroborative evidence, or have a variety of other functions, but such details do not move the message forward.

Common intensifiers are adverbs such as “very” and “exceedingly,” and any superlative construction. But concepts may be intensified by a variety of surface-structure forms: “a brilliant performance,” “of crucial importance,” “pitch black,” “a supreme effort.” In Shellfish 7 we find “with a guarantee that they are free of viral contamination.” This means much the same as “absolutely free,” i.e., it is an intensifier. Its removal from the themeline enables us to state the theme more succinctly.

The same criterion also enables us to refine the first part of our theme. The word “substantial” in 1 sounds prominent, but in fact its function is to put prominence on the following word, “increases”; it is another intensifier. Hence we do not count it as part of the theme, but as confirming the thematic status of “increases.”

The term “modification” is used to cover supplementary detail not essential to the development of the message. Modification, in English, often takes the form of adjectives, adverbs, and peripheral noun phrases, which stand to the thing they modify in some associative relationship such as classification or amplification. Our previous discussion of these relations (15.4.2.2) involved the relationship of whole clauses (more strictly, whole propositions) to each other; here we are dealing with only parts of clauses (more strictly, concepts).

It seems easier, analytically, to separate the way clauses relate to each other from the way concepts are related at a lower level; nevertheless a close relationship between them should be noted, one-word modifications can be upgraded with respect to prominence by restating them as a whole clause. Thus “uncooked shellfish” (1), in which “uncooked” modifies “shellfish,” could be restated as “shellfish which have not been cooked” or “shellfish when eaten raw.” The relationship is the same in each case, as is the content: it is the prominence which differs, the one-word form signalling less prominence.

On this criterion, then, we remove from our theme statement “uncooked” in 1, “by sewage” in 4 (this concept is already covered generically by “contamination”), and “bivalve” in 7. This does not imply that they are of some secondary status cognitively. The reader, from segment 1 onwards, is thinking of uncooked shellfish as a single, complex concept, and from segment 2 is thinking of uncooked cockles and oysters. But in establishing the theme we select only the more generic elements from the complex concepts held in the mind, on the grounds (in this text) that only the generic “shellfish” is required by the rest of the thematic framework. It is probable that generics play a significant role in storage, since they allow ordered high-level handling of much low-level detail, while simultaneously providing immediate access to their specifics. (But see 15.4.4, last paragraph.)

15.4.3 The theme of the Shellfish text annotated

To summarise our findings, the text itself is presented here in an annotated form. Thematic material is in bold italic, nonthematic material in normal italic, since both represent conceptual material. The evidence for the decision in each case is in normal print and in parentheses.

(1) In Britain in the last decade (orientation:setting) substantial (intensifier) increases have been seen in infections acquired from uncooked (modification) shellfish (schematic: problem/mystery) —

(2) especially cockles and oysters (specifics of “shellfish”)

(3) These include both gastroenteritis and hepatitis (specifics of “infections”) (World Health Organisation Weekly Epidemiological Record 1988; 63:133–4).(orientation: source)

(4) The cause (schematic: relation between mystery and explanation)

is thought (orientation: authorial comment) to be increasing contamination of estuaries (schematic: explanation of mystery) by sewage (modification);

(5) until this pollution is controlled (nonprominent relation: condition)

(6) the conclusion has to be that (orientation: signpost)

(7) “bivalve (modification) shellfish cannot be supplied with a guarantee that they are (intensifier) free of viral contamination.” (schematic: non-solution to problem).

A few comments on the analysis are relevant here. The removal of specifics (2 and 3) and modifications (1, 4, and 7) from thematic status could be challenged since this text is exceedingly brief and aimed at a medical audience; it could therefore be claimed that every word counts. This is particularly true of the specifics “especially cockles and oysters” in 2, as this is taken up again in 7 with the generic “bivalve.” We should bear in mind, however, that in establishing the theme of a passage we are not attempting to include everything which the recipient might afterwards wish (or need) to recall—this could be said of anything in the text. Rather we aim to include the essential framework of the message. We are assuming, first, that this framework corresponds to the essential elements in the conceptual structures of the message-sender and recipient and, second, that any desired detail can be retrieved in memory by means of the appropriate part of the framework. Thus “cockles and oysters” (2) could be tracked down via “shellfish” (1), and “sewage” via “contamination” (both in 4).

A problem involving conflicting criteria also arises. It concerns the status of segment 5 with respect to the themeline, which is carried by segments 1, 4 and 7. Segment 1 has the dual schematic function of mystery and problem, but while the relation between the mystery and its explanation (4) is signalled both in the content and by an overt marker (“cause”), the relation between the problem (increase in infections) and the nonsolution (continued contamination of shellfish in 7) is less apparent. Segment 4 provides the content required to make the relation clear: shellfish are infected because estuaries are contaminated. But segment 5 develops the causality involved: it is of indefinite future duration—as long as estuaries are contaminated, shellfish will be contaminated also.

This, then, is the point at which criteria conflict. Segment 5 is considered nonthematic because it realises the nonprominent relation of condition (15.4.1.2); it is also referentially nonprominent, containing little new content beyond that of 4. Yet it could be considered schematically prominent, and therefore thematic, because it makes explicit the relation between the contamination of estuaries (4) and the continued contamination of shellfish (7).

There are three possible solutions to this dilemma, none of which is unreasonable.

(1) We can maintain segment 5 as non-thematic, on the grounds that the schematic relationship is adequately signalled in the content of the units concerned.

(2) We can raise segment 5 to thematic status because of its schematic contribution; this involves bringing in the concepts of control and future indefinite time span as elements in the theme.

(3) We can raise only the causal relationship (signalled by “until”) to thematic status, the content needed being assumed from 4. (In this case segment 5 is taken as meaning “If the situation in 4 remains unchanged.”)

15.4.4 The theme of the Shellfish text stated

The mystery and explanation elements of the schema (segments 1 and 4) provide part of the theme:

Increases have been seen in infections acquired from shellfish. This is due to increasing contamination of estuaries.

Slightly varying forms of the rest of the theme are possible, depending on the way in which 5 is related schematically to 4 and 7:

(1) Shellfish cannot be supplied free of viral contamination. (5 taken as nonthematic.)

(2) Until this pollution is controlled, shellfish cannot be supplied free of viral contamination. (5 taken as thematic.)

(3) Shellfish therefore cannot be supplied free of viral contamination. (“Therefore” realises the consequence relation.)

Note that we have stated the theme in words closely corresponding to the words of the text, usually exactly. This does not sound very natural (not surprisingly, since much of the original has been removed), nor is it always possible, depending on the text. Sometimes, for instance, a generic has to be supplied which is not overtly expressed, as in Barefoot 1–6, which realises the schematic problem: Over one-third of humanity is in dire need.

The theme stated more naturally. The analyst is at liberty to provide a more natural-sounding version of the theme, provided he does not change the content or relationships of the schema elements. The exact words are not important in themselves; we do not, after all, store the exact words, but the conceptual structures that they signal. Possible changes in the interests of naturalness would be to replace abstract nouns by concrete ones or by verbal forms, as appropriate. It would also be more natural to use some ellipsis, as we do in normal speech, rather than express every relationship in full. This may be formally less accurate, and will certainly sound less close to the original text, but it is possible that it is in some respects closer to concepts as we actually store them, e.g., we may store a concept realised by “sewage” more accessibly than a concept realised by the more abstract “contamination.” A more natural version of the theme, then, is as follows:

Infections from shellfish (ellipsis) have been increasing (verbalisation of abstract noun) because sewage (concrete for abstract) in estuaries has been increasing (verbalisation). So shellfish remain liable (positive for double negative) to be infected (verbalisation) by viruses (concrete).

15.4.5 How theme and summary are related

We started this chapter by saying that theme is related to our ability to summarise. We can now trace this relationship somewhat more accurately: the theme, as we have analysed it in this chapter, is the conceptual framework on which the message sender constructs his message as he communicates it and to which the recipient likewise attaches the various elements in the message as he receives them. It is the essential skeleton involved in the communication of the message and in its correct understanding by the recipient.

A summary, on the other hand, is not concerned with the communication of messages, but with remembering them and with providing a trigger to bring their essential content to mind. It is possible, therefore, for summaries to be considerably shorter than the corresponding theme, depending on the purpose of the summary.

If a summary is meant only as a reminder to someone already familiar with the message, it can be very short, as in “Peter challenges Miraz to single combat.” If it is meant to convey the content of the message succinctly to someone to whom the message is unfamiliar, then it will need to be longer, but probably not as long as the theme. A summary of the Shellfish text, for someone who has not read it, might well omit the problem/mystery element of the theme, and include only the explanation and conclusion, (that is, the (non)resolution): “Shellfish are contaminated because of sewage in estuaries.” This is sufficient to enable a potential reader to know if he wishes to pursue the matter further. A summary for a different audience might include the element of “infections” but omit “estuaries”: “Infections from contaminated shellfish are likely to continue.”

Sometimes the summary must virtually recapitulate the entire theme, as when our Spanish-speaking student had failed to understand the lecture: he needed to know all the main points (i.e., the schematic elements) and their interrelations. But if what is needed is an attention-attracting heading, as in a magazine article, then even the shortest summary discussed above is not short enough. Something much more pithy would be required, such as “Sewage spoils shellfish!” or even, abandoning thematicity, “Cook those Cockles!”

The shorter the summary, the more selective it will need to be, and the selection of elements for inclusion depends on the outlook and interests of the summary-provider and the audience. There are, however, limits. The prominence in the original message must be maintained. A summary such as “Gastroenteritis is caused by oysters” elevates unimportant details at the expense of the main thrust of the message. Even the briefest summary must include the most prominent content of the message as originally given.

15.5 Establishing the theme of a timeline text

15.5.1 Identifying the prominent content

15.5.1.1 Schematic prominence

The Joggers text is a good example of a timeline text with a purpose-fulfilment schema (see section 12.3.3.2).

Purpose: A motorist pulled over . . . to have a nap. (1)

Obstacle 1: A jogger rapped on his window to ask the

time. (3)

Obstacle 2: he was awakened by another jogger rapping

on the window. “. . . do you know the time?”

he asked. (7–8)

Attempt to overcome obstacle: The motorist wrote a short note, stating “I

don’t know the time.” (12–14)

Obstacle 3/failed fulfilment: Another jogger began rapping on the

window . . . he said, “It’s a quarter to nine.”

(16–18).

15.5.1.2 Relational prominence

Events recorded in strict chronological succession have no inherent prominence of one event more than another. But such succession is not the norm: usually successive events are reported with some light and shade, some difference in prominence value. This is the case in the Joggers text: “he was awakened” (7) is more prominent than “Looking at his watch” (9). This variation in prominence is provided by the overlay of other relations upon the underlying relation of sequence in time.

The relations in chronological texts will be discussed more fully in chapter 16. For now, we will look at the most common relations only. These are stimulus-response, step-goal, reason-result and (speech) orienter-speech (prominence is indicated, as before, by capitalisation).

With respect to relations, then, the theme of the Joggers text might be expected to consist of the prominent elements listed, i.e. of responses, goals, results and contents, but not of stimuli, steps, reasons and orienters. For the most part, this is the case and our thematic analysis is confirmed:

(1b) to have a nap: goal of 1a

(3b) to ask the time: goal of 3a

(8) “do you know the time?” he asked: goal of 7b

(12) so he wrote a short note: response to the situation in 11, which is a summary of 3–10

(14) it stated: “I don’t know the time”: content of 12

(18) he said, “It’s a quarter to nine”: goal of 17

There remain several schematically important elements which are not prominent relationally. But since schematic prominence outranks relational prominence in establishing themes, this does not cast doubt on the theme as already established. It does, however, raise several points of interest.

The first has to do with “A motorist pulled over” in segment 1. This is in the nonprominent relationship of a step towards the goal of having a nap. However, the relationship assumes that some participant has that goal, hence takes that step. At the beginning of a text, when no such participant can be assumed from earlier in the message, this participant must be foregrounded conceptually. While it would be possible to state the initial part of the theme as “a motorist wanted to have a nap,” this could lead to misinterpretation—it must be made clear that the main participant was not engaged in a motorist’s usual activity, i.e., driving. Hence the inclusion of “pulled over” in the theme.

Segments 3a, 7b, and 17 raise a further issue. Why should these be included in the theme, since in each case rapping on the window was simply a step towards the goal of either asking or telling the time? If this were a straight narrative text without humour, these would not be considered as part of the theme. The reason for including them here (apart from the fact that the rapping wakened the motorist—part of the obstacle in the schema) is that the humour depends on the build-up of expectations and the build-up depends on repetition.

Another point of interest is found in 7, “he was . . . awakened by another jogger” (obstacle 2). This could be considered as standing in a contra-expectation relation to the nonprominent “sleeping at last,” and since contraexpectation plays a large part in humour, this is a valid analysis. But we are dealing here with a network of relationships, not just a simple relationship, and there is a further relationship here which is interesting. In the vast majority of cases, a stimulus precedes its response, but here the response “he was soon awakened” precedes the stimulus “rapping on the window.” Storyline time and real time part company here. The inversion gives extra prominence to the response.

15.5.1.3 Topical prominence

The topic of this text is A motorist, wanting to sleep, is repeatedly interrupted by joggers. All references to motorist/man, joggers, sleep and interruptions therefore have potential thematic status.

The other prominent content in the text is undoubtedly the repeated references to the passage of time and to clock time. References to the passage of time (“As . . .” in 2, “at last” in 6, “soon” in 7, “A few minutes later” in 16) are not considered thematic, since they serve primarily as a measure of progression along the timeline. They also serve to heighten the unwelcomeness of the interruption in each case, but the thematic element is the interruption itself, the shortness of the time-lapse is simply a supporting detail.

References to clock time are a much stronger candidate for thematic status; indeed, “it’s a quarter to nine” (18) has already been established as thematic. The other two instances (5 and 10) are both relationally prominent, being in response relationship to the stimulus of the jogger’s question. Why, then, should these two time references be excluded from the theme?

The answer is twofold. First, as pointed out in the previous sections, prominent relations are not always thematic. (The longer the message, the more nonthematic material there is likely to be. Such material consists of inter-related elements, of which some are more prominent than others—but they are not thereby thematic.)

Second, in the case of 5 and 10, relational prominence is overruled by schematic nonprominence. The two obstacle configurations (2–5 and 6–10) both peak at the point where the jogger asks the time, that is, when the motorist’s sleep is interrupted. The interruption is what is thematically important, not the motorist’s reply. It would not be hard to compose a briefer version of this text with the motorist’s response omitted entirely, yet still with the same theme (“A motorist was trying to sleep, but a passing jogger woke him by asking the time. A few minutes later another jogger came along with the same question. To avoid further disturbance, the man wrote a note . . .”). The theme is the conceptual framework on which the message is constructed: any elements which can readily be retrieved from that framework (as here, answers retrieved from questions) should not be included in it.

15.5.1.4 Special prominence

The prominence provided by repetition in the Joggers text has already received comment (section 13.4.2). The inversion of order in 7 was also noted earlier (last paragraph of section 15.5.1.2), with its consequent extra prominence on “awakened.”

Lexical prominence does not play a major part in the Joggers text. There are only two examples: “proclaimed” (5) and “sorely needed” (15). “Proclaimed” collocates rather oddly with telling someone the time: it is prominent for humorous and not for thematic purposes. “Sorely needed” also adds to the humour by highlighting the motorist’s strong desire for sleep just at the moment when it is going to be thwarted. It is, however, simply an extra detail, not even a new detail, and is not thematic.

15.5.2 Identifying nonthematic content

The most common reason for nonthematic status in the Joggers text is relational nonprominence, (i.e., being the less prominent partner in a relational pairing). Segment 2 (“as he settled down in the seat and closed his eyes”) stands in the relation of circumstance to a following head, as do 6 and 15. Hence all are nonthematic. An example of the step-goal relationship is found in 4 (“He found his watch”) and also in 9 and 13. (In 13, sticking the note on the window is a necessary step towards the goal of everyone seeing it.) The relation of reason to a more prominent result is found in 11 (“At this rate he wasn’t getting much sleep”).

Another kind of nonthematic content is an element that stands apart in some way from the message proper. In segment 1, “on a side street” stands apart as the locational setting for the whole event series. Similar to this are the courtesy elements that introduce direct speech in 8 and 18. These are set apart from the rest of the message by being without referential content; they are simply speech introducers appropriate to the occasion.

Descriptive detail is nonthematic: “bleary-eyed” in 4 is an example. The time words and phrases in 6, 7 and 16 are also considered to be nonthematic detail.

In addition, “came along” in 16 is excluded from thematic status. It has virtually no content, its function being simply to introduce the third jogger; it is therefore nonprominent.

15.5.3 The theme of the Joggers text annotated

(1) A motorist pulled over (introducing main character/step)

on a side street (setting)

to have a nap (schematic: purpose)

(2) As he settled down in the seat and closed his eyes, (nonprominent relation: circumstance)

(3) a jogger rapped on his window to ask the time, (schematic: obstacle 1)

(4) Bleary-eyed, (modification)

he found his watch (step)

(5) and proclaimed it to be 8 a.m. (answer, here schematically less prominent than the question)

(6) Sleeping at last, (circumstance)

(7) he was . . . awakened by another jogger rapping on the window. (schematic: obstacle 2)

soon (modification)

(8) “Excuse me, sir, (non-content introducer)

do you know the time?” he asked. (schematic: obstacle 2 continued)

(9) Looking at his watch, (step)

(10) he told the man it was 8.30. (nonprominent answer)

(11) At this rate he wasn’t getting much sleep, (reason, stimulus to following action),

(12) so he wrote a short note (schematic: attempt to overcome obstacles)

(13) and stuck it on the window (step)

for all to see. (schematic: attempt continued)

(14) It stated: “I don’t know the time.” (schematic: attempt continued—content of note)

(15) Again the man settled down for his sorely needed nap. (circumstance)

(16) A few minutes later (modification)

another jogger (schematic: obstacle 3/ failed fulfilment) came along (step)

(17) and began rapping on the window. (schematic: obstacle 3/ failed fulfilment continued).

(18) “Hey, mister,” (non-content introducer)

he said, “It’s a quarter to nine.” (schematic: obstacle 3/ failed fulfilment continued/attempt misunderstood)

The Joggers text demonstrates a complete schema in a few lines. Its very compactness, however, makes it atypical. Most time-based texts are considerably longer, with the schema-bearing elements consequently much further apart and with much more nonthematic material interspersed. In such texts the analyst should not waste time trying to exclude nonthematic material clause by clause, as has been done here. Rather, whole configurations (paragraph length or longer) should be considered as thematic or nonthematic. Very similar reasons to those adduced here on clause level will be found to apply.

This text is complicated by being simultaneously a narrative and a joke, but with one themeline common to both; in 18 a double label has been provided, to account for the simultaneous conclusion of both the narrative and the joke. But it is probable that in some jokes the overlap is not so complete. It should also be borne in mind that the present analysis has not handled the nonthematic material under the joke aspect, except in occasional comments.

15.5.4 The theme of the Joggers text stated

Expressed in the words of the text, the theme is as follows:

A motorist pulled over to have a nap.

A jogger rapped on the window to ask the time.

He (the motorist) was soon awakened by another jogger rapping on the window.

“Do you know the time?” he asked.

He (the motorist) wrote a short note for all to see.

It stated, “I don’t know the time.”

Another jogger began rapping on the window.

He said, “It’s quarter to nine.”

This can be shortened by substituting generics for specifics, and reducing repetition. The theme can then be restated as follows:

A motorist stopped to have a nap.

He was twice awakened by joggers rapping on the window to ask the time.

He displayed a notice saying that he didn’t know the time.

Another jogger rapped on the window—and told him the time.

The difference between a theme and a summary was discussed in 15.4.5. In a summary of the Joggers text, the nature of the interruptions could be omitted altogether. The outcome would be sufficient: “Sleepy motorist fails to get his nap.”

15.6 Complex themes

15.6.1 Overlapping themes

We have already seen examples of overlapping themes in the texts studied in this chapter. The Joggers text is simultaneously a joke and an eventline narrative with a purpose-fulfilment schema: the story and the joke exhibit complete overlap. The Shellfish text illustrates partial overlap of themes: the problem-resolution and mystery-explanation schemas share the same referential material initially (segment 1 is both problem and mystery), but they terminate separately.

15.6.2 Multiple themes

Sometimes a long message has several interwoven themes that are relatively independent of each other. Usually one of them is dominant. A detective story, predominantly mystery-explanation in structure, may have a different subschema in connection with a major character (Lord Peter Wimsey eventually marries Harriet Vane). A romance may contain substories about minor characters. In Pride and Prejudice, for instance, the main theme concerns Elizabeth and Darcy, but the story of Lydia and Wickham is also pursued and intersects with the main story at a crucial point. This is not a case of shared referential material, as with overlapping themes. Rather, different referential material develops the different themes independently; nevertheless the separate stories intersect and affect each other. Sometimes the substories are concluded independently, sometimes one grand denouement resolves everything: in either case, the analyst has to trace the independent themes through the text and note their interrelations.

15.6.3 Simultaneous prosodic themes

Simultaneous prosodic themes provide a parallel theme to an existing structural framework (see section 10.4, and “mixed schemas” in the last paragraph of section 12.3.2.1). Usually such a prosodic theme is expressive: it either expresses the attitude of the writer (to the referential content or to the readers) or highlights emotive or evaluative elements in the referential material. Such expressive elements are, of course, frequent in many texts. We call them thematic only when their impact extends over a considerable stretch of referential material, and when they are collectively comparable to the structural framework in importance. Such a prosodic theme realises an expressive purpose of the writer, which he pursues simultaneously with the informative or volitional purpose on which the message is overtly structured.

Strictly, such prosodic strands are not themes as we have defined them; they do not provide a framework of message development. But it is not only the framework of a message which is significant, and when prosodies of emotion or value pervade large stretches of a message they are commonly called thematic. It is important to maintain the distinction between schematic (or structural) themes and prosodic themes: schematic themes relate to the constructing and understanding of messages; prosodic themes relate to their impact.

Prosodic themes are usually found in texts longer than any in this volume, but we will use the Picnic text as an illustration. The first chapter of The Wind in the Willows, from which it is taken, has no tension-based schema, but is structured around several readily identifiable eventline configurations: Mole leaves home (with no set purpose, but in response to the urgent summons of the spring), discovers the river, meets the Water Rat, goes off in the boat with him, has a picnic, meets various key characters briefly, causes a boating accident, and is invited back to the Water Rat’s home for an indefinite period. (The lack of any schema-based theme makes such a chapter rather cumbersome to summarise.) However, this eventline does not exhaust the significant material in the chapter. Interwoven with the recorded events are a series of descriptions and conversations which all serve to highlight how new riverside life is to the Mole, and how delightful he finds it. It could well be claimed, therefore, that the author had two purposes in this chapter: first, to introduce the setting of the book and its main characters—in other words, a structural purpose; second, to evaluate positively the delights of relaxing by the river, an expressive purpose. Both are presented through the eyes (or rather, through all the senses) of the Mole. It could well be claimed that, of the two themes, the simultaneous expressive one is the more important, especially as it recurs throughout the book.

In the Picnic passage, Mole’s newness on the riverside scene surfaces in the description “the still awkward Mole” (3); his delight in his new experiences is expressed by “excited” (10), “mysterious packets” (12), “still gasping ‘O my! O my!’ at each fresh revelation” (14–16), and “very glad” (20). It is typical that this prosody is realised by adjectives and quoted speech.

A possible structural theme for this passage is The Mole discovers the river and spends the day boating with the Water Rat. But this represents the passage inadequately because it takes no account of the prosodic theme. A combined theme might be, The Mole discovers the delights of the river and enjoys a day boating with the Water Rat. Variations in the wording are possible, since they are selected to represent as effectively as possible thematic cognitive material which is stored nonverbally.

It is possible that in some messages (love letters and poetry come to mind) the prosodic theme may be more dominant than the structural theme, if any.

15.7 Configurations without themes

We have spoken so far as if all configurations had themes, but this is not in fact the case. All configurations have a function, which is just another way of saying that they are included in the message for some purpose, but they do not all have themes.

Sometimes, for example, a configuration may function as an element in a thematic patterning, say as motivation for a directed activity, or as the purpose to which several different means units have been building up. But the configuration itself may have no theme in the sense of material exhibiting development. There may be no detectable progression in it at all.

An example of a configuration of this kind is found in The Barefoot Revolution (7–12). This configuration functions as the rejected solution in the thematic framework. It consists simply of a generic statement (“First World development aid has often made things worse”) followed by two specific examples. Its function in the larger whole, which is quite clear, is expressed in the generic initial statement. We would therefore call the generic statement the head element of the unit, but that exhausts the prominent material in the unit. There is no internal development in the unit itself, no schema patternings which would give rise to further subdivisions.

Two questions arise at this point. What kind of structure do such configurations have, if they lack thematic structuring? And with what function or significance may we expect to find them operating in messages?

First, as to the structure of such units, this is quite easily answered. The constituent propositions of such configurations are joined to each other in referential and presentation relations—the relations of time and causality, and logic and restatement. Sometimes, if the only relation is addition, they exhibit relations such as whole-to-part or member-to-class—relations which we normally think of as relating concepts to each other. In either case, there is clear relational organisation, and in most cases this gives rise to a structure in which some proposition or propositional cluster is prominent. Thus in the example just quoted the generic statement carries more prominence than the two specifics.

We have here, therefore, an example of a unit with relational structure but without schematic structure—it has a single prominent element or core, but no theme. The prominent element may carry material which is thematic at another level, but the unit itself has no internal thematic development.

Second, as to the function of such units in messages, we are able to list three readily documented functions (more may be found as our understanding of theme develops):

(1) Organised units without a theme of their own may function at a low level in the theme of a larger message. The example given earlier in this section is in this category.

(2) Organised nonthematic units may function as orienting material within messages, that is, as settings, explanations, and so on. These often exhibit no internal development, and the message proper just marks time at this point—it is no further ahead at the end than it was at the beginning. An example of this is the explanation in Radon 3. Its propositional form would be more or less as follows: Radon is a gas. Radon is radioactive. Rocks such as granite emit radon. This kind of description exhibits no development: it simply lists certain characteristics of an entity.

(3) Entire messages may be nonthematic. These are usually factual in nature; they are discussed in detail in section 12.4.

16

REFERENTIAL RELATIONS

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16.6.2 Determining the major configurations and their relations

16.6.3 The first major configuration: relational display

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16.6.5 The third major configuration: relational display

In chapter 12 we saw how a message sender organises what he wants to say with specific purposes in mind, and in chapters 13–15 how he organises it into manageable chunks. We also observed that the underlying referential content, which is moulded in this way, itself consists of material which is neither homogeneous on the one hand nor chaotic on the other, but rather shows a diversity organised in coherent relationships.

In the last chapter (and also in section 10.3) we took a quick preview of some of those relationships. We saw, for instance, that the relations underlying the Shellfish text (see 15.4.2) differ from those underlying the Joggers text (see 15.5.1.2 and 15.5.2). So we are already aware that relations function in networks. It is important to stress this because in this chapter, as we consider the relations in detail, we study each one separately. But we must not be misled into thinking that relations are therefore inherently independent and isolable. They are not. Characteristically, relations form networks, and we shall try to redress the balance by illustrating a complete network at the end of this chapter.

16.1 The nature of referential relations

The relations we will study in this chapter are called referential relations, because they are determined primarily by the referential world of the message, and not by the writer’s purposes (which determine the schema relations), nor by the writer’s faculties of comparing and associating (which determine the presentation relations, to be considered in chapter 17). There is a hard core of facts, the world out there, which we are not at liberty to organise as we wish when presenting messages. We share this world with others, who are equally constrained by it, and it forms the content of most of our thinking and communicating. Referential relations organise our mental content to correspond to the relations found in this objective world, especially those of time and causality. Reporting relations also have their origin in the real world, making clear who said what. Temporal, causal, and reporting relations are all either claimed to be true of the world of the message, or are envisaged as consistent with it.

It is important to bear in mind that referential relations relate conceptual structures, patternings in our minds. From this it follows that although we illustrate the relations primarily by relating clauses to each other, this is only a realisation in language of a relationship in the mind, between propositions, not clauses. It also follows that although the examples are low-level examples, clause joined to clause (or, conceptually, proposition joined to proposition), the same relations also join much larger thought units of various sizes i.e., configurations. The chronological relation of succession, for example, can join propositions (two successive events) or propositional clusters (two activity spans—for example, cooking a meal and then serving it) or configurations at paragraph level or higher (episodes as in a novel). The same relations link small units and large ones.

16.2 The signalling of relations

It is important to remember that there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between meaning relations and the surface-structure forms that signal them. If we were simply looking for a single meaning relation signalled by a single connective such as “if,” “because,” or “so,” our task would be simple. But in fact one connective may signal several different relations, and most relations can be signalled in a variety of ways. The situation is complex.

In English, for example, a single surface-structure connective may have several meaning relations simultaneously. I may say to my son, “If you come straight home from school, you’ll be in time to go to the ice rink with Matthew.” The only surface-structure connective is “if,” but the underlying meaning relationship between his coming home and his going to the ice rink is a multiple one. Viewed simply from the chronological standpoint, their order in time is fixed. Coming home precedes going to the ice rink; they are envisaged in that order and no other. However, they are also causally connected. No one yet knows if either will actually happen, but if the first does, the other will follow. From the point of view of my son’s motivation, he is being exhorted to do something (come straight home) because of an inducement held out to him (going to the ice rink).

Sometimes there is no surface-structure connective at all, yet there is still a meaning relation between the units concerned. Suppose I say, “She passed first time; she’d worked ever so hard.” I am not presenting two unrelated facts—I am asserting that her hard work was the reason for her passing.

Sometimes a signal realises different relations in different contexts, as in the following examples:

“If you can’t find it, I’ll lend you mine.”

“I’ll lend you mine, if you’ll return it by tonight.”

“If things are that bad, I’ll lend you mine.”

In the first example, “if” expresses the appropriate context for the offer of lending something, in the second it expresses the condition of the offer, and in the third the reason for the offer. Labelling them all as conditionals blurs important distinctions. Nor does this exhaust the possibilities. A further use of “if” is to introduce a clause that is used not to refer, but to express an attitude, as in, “If you really want to know, I gave it away.” Here the speaker is not hypothesising about the hearer’s desires or knowledge, but is reluctantly communicating unwelcome information—hence this is a mitigating usage.

One way of ascertaining that different relations are indeed involved is to find other ways in which the same meaning could be expressed. An equivalent of “If you can’t find it, I’ll lend you mine” is “Can’t you find it?—I’ll lend you mine.” An equivalent of the second example makes the conditionality explicit: “I’ll lend you mine on condition that you return it by tonight.” An equivalent of the third example is “Since things are that bad, I’ll lend you mine.” The mitigating example also offers other possibilities. We may say, “I hate to admit it, but . . .” or “I hope you don’t mind too much, but . . .” In each case, the alternative realisations are not interchangeable. The different relations each have a different range of possible expressions.

It goes without saying that different languages realise the same relations quite differently. A non-European language, for example, may not have a single equivalent for “and”—it may quite possibly have two or three, used in different contexts. In South America we find words for “and” that signal a short time lapse and at the same time indicate which participant is the agent in the next clause, or whether the agent’s objective has changed. The same connective that carries the time relation also carries the discourse signal. These are purely referential matters and not relations at all, yet they are signalled by a connective, one that is already carrying a time relation. Too often analysts in such languages are content with identifying just one of the several meaning components carried by a connective, especially if the identified one correlates well with a familiar conjunction in English.

It should by now be clear that although the analyst must use all available clues provided by connectives and grammatical constructions, the main evidence for any meaning relation lies in the content of the two related units. It is necessary to look beyond the surface-structure signals to what is being talked about, to the referential content concerned.

Before studying referential relations in detail, however, we must pause to remind ourselves of one of their most important characteristics. Of the two units concerned, one is frequently more prominent than the other. By identifying the prominent members of several such pairs, we are able to adduce the main thrust of the message at a given point. (We have already made use of this factor in our study of themes (see sections 15.4.1.2 and 15.5.1.2) and will meet it again later.)

But we should not think that related propositions are invariably in pairs. Sometimes several less prominent propositions relate to one prominent one, for example, several reasons to the same result. Sometimes supporting propositions stand in different relations to one head, as in “If she’s still unwell tomorrow, we’ll stay indoors to keep her company.”

As a means of indicating the naturally prominent element in a configuration its relational label is written in small capitals (e.g., reason-result). If the elements are of equal natural prominence, then lowercase letters are used for both (e.g., stimulus-response). When the prominent proposition stands in relation to two different supporting elements, in different relations, the prominent proposition can either be given a double label, or more simply be labelled as head. This is the case in the previous example, where “we’ll stay indoors” stands in consequence relation to the condition (“If she’s still unwell tomorrow . . .”) and in means relationship to the purpose (“. . . to keep her company”).

As long as a cluster of propositions contains only one prominent proposition, or head, it constitutes one configuration. A second prominent proposition is an indication that a second configuration is present.

16.3 Relations involving time and causality

We view the events and states in our world as being related chronologically and causally. When we report such events and states, we feel that those relations of time and causality belong in the real world: we consider ourselves to be reporting the way things are, not just the way we happen to see them. Caesar’s famous “I came, I saw, I conquered” could not have been put in any other order—that was how it happened. If I say, “There was such a traffic jam that I was two hours late,” then I mean that the traffic jam actually and objectively caused my lateness. Others may dispute my analysis of the situation, but I am claiming that there was a causal relationship in the referential world between the traffic jam and my lateness. My talking about it in that way merely reflected the existing relationship, as far as I was concerned.

Thus we experience and talk about our referential world in terms of these two related parameters, time and causality. All events can be ranked on a chronological scale in terms of their time relation to other events—all events are caused by preceding events, and in turn cause other events that follow them. Obviously, these two parameters are related since effects are always later on the time scale than their causes. Nevertheless, we distinguish the two. We can be interested in the chronological relationship between two events, while the causal relationship (if any) is unimportant. Alternatively, we can focus on the fact that one caused the other, and their necessary chronological relationship is assumed as something very backgrounded, which does not need overt mention.

Because the chronological and causal parameters are so related, they necessarily overlap. Since, however, the human mind normally focuses on one or the other, it is helpful to subdivide referential relations according to whether chronology or causality is foremost at the time of speaking.

16.3.1 Relations with time in focus

Relations with time in focus are of two basic types: without a causal overlay and with a causal overlay. Those without a causal overlay include sequential relations (either within an activity span or in different activity spans), and simultaneous relations (either completely overlapping or partially overlapping). Those with a causal overlay include step-goal and stimulus-response.

Time relations are considered to have no inherent natural prominence, since importance does not depend on the time of occurrence. Different degrees of prominence are frequently present, especially when there is a causal overlay, but these depend on the content expressed, not on temporal successivity. Relations with equal natural prominence are written as seq1-seq2, step-goal, etc. When one of the related elements carries more prominence in a given context, the usual conventions are observed in the display, e.g., step-goal, step-goal.

16.3.1.1 Without a causal overlay: sequential relations

When two meaning units are joined in sequential relation, one is claimed to have happened earlier and the other later with respect to each other. Usually the events concerned share a closer relationship than simply temporal succession. If, for example, I say, “I put the letter in an envelope, addressed it, and stuck on a stamp,” then the relationship between the three events is obviously much closer than if I had said, “I switched on the kettle, filled the sugar bowl, and turned the gas low under the carrots,” although the time intervals involved could well have been identical. It is much more normal for us to talk of groupings of events that are purposively related, than of events whose relationship is only chronological. Such closely related groupings are known as activity spans.

While it is true that languages differ in how they report chronological sequence, nevertheless many, like English, distinguish between events which relate to each other in one activity span and those which do not. It would be quite natural to say, “I took the dog for a walk before going to bed” (successive events, different activity spans), but it would be quite unnatural to say, “I boiled the water before making the tea” or “I got up before getting dressed” (successive events, same activity span).

Events, of course, are not necessarily reported in the order in which they actually occurred. I can say, “Before I went to bed, I took the dog for a walk.” Here the order of events is reversed in my report of them. In a longer message, a flashback can revert to a point in time earlier than the point currently being reported. In either case, the surface structure always makes the actual chronological relationship clear. The analyst has two tasks here: to determine the order referred to and to assess the purpose of departing from that order in the report.

16.3.1.2 Without a causal overlay: simultaneous relations

Two events may be reported as occurring simultaneously: “While the children were swimming, their parents were sunbathing on the beach.” It is irrelevant whether the two events began and ended simultaneously or not. For the speaker, the fact that they were going on at the same time was what counted—he saw that relationship as relevant and that was what he reported.

Sometimes the overlap is complete and the time span is specified. An example of this is Barefoot 3–4: “land under millet has fallen by 30–40 per cent in the last ten years (the population has risen by 25 per cent).”

It is obviously possible to relate an event and a state in a chronological relationship of simultaneity. An example is “While the young birds were in the nest, the parents fed them assiduously” in which a state (location) is simultaneous with an iterative event. Two states can also be simultaneous with each other, as in “While he was out of the country, his friends and family were very anxious” in which a location is simultaneous with an emotional state.

Sometimes propositions exhibit a relation of partial, rather than complete, overlap in time. Numerous variations are possible here. The most common are:

Durative within durative “She went through quite a

rebellious stage while her parents

were working abroad.”

Punctiliar within durative “It was while they were

holidaying in France that they

unexpectedly met up with

Richard.”

Durative terminated by punctiliar “The class was in an uproar

when the headmaster appeared at

the door.”

Sometimes events are reported with the chronological sequence so backgrounded that it is quite inexact. I may say, for instance, “I’m going out to visit Marilyn this afternoon; Sue is expecting the tennis club committee round, and Jim is going to clear out the shed.” Here the time sequence is neither clear nor important. It is probably best to handle such relations as a kind of general simultaneity, inasmuch as all the events mentioned occur within one time span, although not at specified points. Note that the relevant time span is stated overtly: “this afternoon.” This is obviously a time prosody relevant to all the events mentioned, although realised only with the first.

16.3.1.3 With a causal overlay: step-goal and stimulus-response relations

The step-goal and stimulus-response relations can cause confusion because they are primarily sequential, yet some causality seems also to be present. In the example “He took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and began to struggle with the recalcitrant tailgate,” the events are reported as successive, yet taking off the jacket and rolling up the sleeves were done solely for the purpose of dealing with the tailgate. In some sense, the man’s purpose of mending a faulty tailgate caused him to perform the preparatory actions necessary for its accomplishment. This relationship is called step-goal, and is considered to be on the borders of sequence and causality. There may, of course, be a series of steps to one goal. This relation is especially common in factual messages with a purpose-fulfilment schema, and in volitional messages consisting primarily of instructions.

A similar situation occurs in reverse, when an earlier event acts as a stimulus to a following one, without directly causing it. This is the stimulus-response relationship. An example is “The audience burst into applause, which the soloists acknowledged with deep bows.” Here the audience began-to-applaud is the stimulus and the soloists bowed deeply is the response. The applause did not directly cause the bows, but was the stimulus that elicited bowing as the next appropriate event.

This stimulus-response relationship is very common in the narration of sequential events: “He saw the train coming and began to run” (cognition plus initiated event). “She asked her parents’ permission, which was readily granted” (request plus response-to-request). “This continued for several weeks, until in the end no one ventured on the streets after dark” (situation plus response).

Like the step-goal relation, the stimulus-response relation is considered to exhibit both sequence and causality, with the sequential relationship dominant. It has the additional feature that a series of stimulus-response relations can build up a chaining of events, where each event is a response to the one that precedes it and is also the stimulus to the one that follows it. Prominence in such a chain is not predictable, but depends on the importance of the chained elements in their context. A very common form of stimulus-response chain is a reported conversation, in which each person’s contribution forms the stimulus for the next, as well as the response to what the previous speaker has said.

Events in stimulus-response and step-goal relationship are normally sequential, since stimuli and steps usually precede the events to which they relate. Much more rarely, simultaneous events also occur with a causal overlay. See the discussion in section 16.6.4, second paragraph from the end.

16.3.2 Relations with causality in focus

Causality so pervades the world and our perceptions of it that a truly formidable number of causal subtypes could be established. These would vary from the strongest and most inescapable causality (“No rain fell for weeks, and the earth began to crack”) to the mildest stimulus and its response (“He raised an eyebrow; she smiled”). It is also possible to distinguish sole cause (“She dropped her doll in the water and it got soaked”) from one cause out of several, especially when only the final cause is mentioned (“She passed her exam, so she’ll be starting college in September”). But some of these many distinctions belong more to metaphysics than to language; fewer distinctions will suffice for our purpose. What is important to the student of communication is that causality can be signalled, verbally, in a variety of ways. Each language will provide its own selection of surface-structure signals. The following examples come from English:

“She was tired, so she lay down for a while.”

“She lay down for a while because she was tired.”

“She lay down for a while, feeling tired.”

“She was tired. She lay down for a while.”

“Since she felt tired, she lay down for a while.”

More formal communications, particularly written ones, provide an even greater range of constructions:

“When he resigned, everyone gave up hope for the firm.”

“Consequent upon his resignation, everyone gave up hope for the firm.”

“Because of his resignation, everyone gave up hope for the firm.”

“He resigned, and everyone gave up hope for the firm.”

“He resigned, whereupon everyone gave up hope for the firm.”

All of these constructions represent the same causal relationship. The surface-structure differences, of course, still have to be accounted for. Among the factors governing the choice of one verbal expression rather than another are prominence, information flow, and the formality or informality of the discourse. The examples which place “she was tired” at the beginning, for instance, give it more prominence than those which place it at the end. The first three examples about resignation assume that the fact of the resignation is already known to the reader, the last two present it as new information. The examples using “consequent upon” and “whereupon” obviously belong to a more formal discourse style than the rest.

We see, then, that relation markers (whether consisting of a single word or of a construction) may simultaneously function as markers of other meaning factors also: a particular marker surfaces in the discourse at the intersection of several meaning factors, not as the unique realisation of one factor. In this chapter, however, we are concerned solely with the relationship being signalled, regardless of what other factors affect the form of that signal.

The subtypes of causality relations to be considered in sections 16.3.2.1–16.3.2.3 involve combinations of causality, purposiveness, and accomplishing of intention. In reason-result relations, the result follows from an event which contained no intention of bringing it about; in means-result relations the result follows from an event deliberately undertaken with the purpose of bringing it about; in means-purpose relations an event is deliberately undertaken in order to bring about a specific result, not stated to have been realised.

16.3.2.1 The reason-result relation

In the reason-result relation, human purposiveness is either absent or considerably backgrounded. If the action of a human being brought about the result, then it was not the intention of that human being to do so. (In the preceding example, the person who resigned did not intend that everyone should lose hope for the firm, but that was, in fact, the result of his action.)

Normally, if events are paired as reason and result, it is the result that is more prominent, being further along the causal chain. The following are examples:

“The service had already started, so she waited outside.”

“Through excessive studies, he became a recluse.” (Because he habit

ually-studied too-much (reason), he became a recluse (result).)

“She left it in the oven too long, and it was ruined.”

“A severe earthquake occurred shortly afterwards, which reduced the

town to rubble.”

These four examples illustrate different kinds of reason-result relationships. In the first, the reason was an event (a service already begun) entirely outside the control of the person who engaged in the resulting action (i.e., waiting). In the second, the event of studying hard was deliberate, but was not performed with the intention of producing the result which actually took place (i.e., becoming a recluse). In the third, the event of leaving something in the oven too long was accidental, and the result unintended.

The fourth example is a little different in that it concerns physical events in the natural world, no people being involved. Examples in our texts are “Radon acts synergistically with tobacco, so that few radon deaths are in non-smokers” (Radon 4 and 5) and “The Aswan dam prevented silt from flowing to the Nile delta and destroyed Egypt’s sardine industry” (Barefoot 11 and 12). Notice in the latter example that the connective “and” is sufficient in that context to signal the result relationship. It could be replaced or expanded, without change of meaning, by “so,” “as a result,” “thereby,” or “with the result that.”

Usually it is not necessary to make these fine distinctions within the reason-result relationship. Sometimes, however, it is helpful to give separate consideration to causality which involves physical events only, as in our last example. In this case it can be called a cause-effect relationship, to distinguish it from those involving human purposiveness. But on the whole it seems better to reserve the terms “cause” and “causality” to cover the whole field in which causal relations are involved, including both the reason-result relation and the others which we will shortly be considering.

It is of course quite possible for the result to be stated first, with the reason following, as in Shellfish 1, (“substantial increases have been seen in infections acquired from uncooked shellfish”) and 4 (“the cause is thought to be increasing contamination by sewage”). Here the result is put first because it is topical, and the reason follows only after two specifics of the result have also been mentioned. The relation concerned is the same, regardless of the order of presentation, but the normal prominence is reversed.

What is common to all the examples quoted is that the result was not intended. This is the diagnostic criterion that distinguishes reason-result from the other causal relations. In addition, in all the above examples, the result is stated as having actually occurred. This is also a useful criterion, with the proviso that, if the reason is in the future, the result will be also: in this case it is not yet actual, but viewed as certain, as in “He won’t be home until late tonight, so he’ll miss the first part of the programme.”

16.3.2.2 The means-result relation

Events in the means-result relation are causally related with the additional factor that the causal event (the means) was intended to bring about the caused event (the result). An element of purpose or design is always present. First, let us consider some examples in which the agent is doing something to fulfil his own purposes; in other words, the agent of the means is also the agent of the result:

“She supports her family by taking in students.”

“He placated her by producing a bunch of flowers.”

“By dint of repeated visits, he gained acceptance with her parents.”

It should be noted that in English the means and the result may occur in either order and also that the English surface structure sometimes disguises the fact that the same agent occurs in both propositions. In “By dint of repeated visits,” which expresses an underlying means proposition (He kept-on-visiting (them)), an abstract noun is used to represent an event, the actor of which is the same as the actor in the result. A passive construction can function similarly: “A large sum was raised for Ethiopia through the combined efforts of all the organisations” (All the organisations worked unitedly is the means and they gained much money for (to help) Ethiopia is the result.)

The situation is more complex when the agent performs an action in order to benefit someone else. More accurately, the real-life situation is perfectly normal, but the way it is expressed in English is confusing, as in the following example:

“Mary was able to go out to work because her sister looked after the children.”

To an English speaker, the relationship here seems at first glance to be result-reason, since the surface-structure signal is “because.” But English “because” is used with both kinds of causal relation, the intended (means) and the unintended (reason). In this instance, Mary’s sister undoubtedly intended the result, that Mary could go out to work; hence the relationship is result-means.

16.3.2.3 The means-purpose relation

In the means-purpose relation, the purpose is stated explicitly, but it is not stated as fulfilled, as in the following:

“They moved house so as to be nearer his work.”

“She followed the instructions closely, in case she got lost.”

“They saved for years so that their son could go to America.”

“I gave him a note to take to his teacher.”

In all these examples there is the possibility that the purpose was not successfully accomplished. The statement in the last example could very easily have been followed by “but he dropped it on the way” and similarly with the other examples. The larger context, of course, might reveal that the purpose was in fact achieved, but at the point where the purpose is stated this is left entirely open. The above examples all refer to the past, but Daffodil Leaves 8–11 provides us with one with future reference: “You should remove flowerheads as soon as they die so that energy is not diverted into seed production.”

In all the preceding examples, the means was stated before the purpose. In English it is possible for the purpose to be presented before the means, but there is usually some special reason for this, such as prominence or scope, as in the following:

“To understand Plato’s argument here, we must first consider the politics of the Greek city-state.”

In this instance the front-shifting of the purpose gives rise to an expectation that it relates to a long following unit, not simply to the clause which immediately follows it. The reader expects to find at least a paragraph about the politics of the Greek city-state, all subsumed under the one purpose of understanding Plato’s argument.

The means-purpose relation is not considered to have any inherent natural prominence: either the means or the purpose may be prominent, depending on the context, and on the newness and importance of the information being communicated. In the earlier examples the means is the prominent element, insofar as it is possible to estimate this without a context. But it is equally possible to have a nonprominent means and a prominent purpose, as in “They spared no effort to welcome her, to make her feel at home, to assuage any lingering doubts and uneasiness.” Here the means, “they spared no effort,” has only very generic content, and the prominence is undoubtedly on the three purposes, which are more like one purpose stated in three different ways for emphasis.

16.4 Relations involving envisaging and causality

Normal communication frequently involves envisaging, that is, conceptualising an event or state which might possibly be true in the real world, but which is not actually true at the moment of communicating. Sometimes this envisaging spans long stretches of communication, as when we say “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if . . .” or “I do hope they don’t . . . ,” or when we give a series of instructions. Often, of course, references to the future are much briefer than this. If the reference is made to some event in the near future, especially to one that is under the control of the speaker, it has almost the same degree of certainty as a reference with the status of actuality. Thus if I say, “I’m going to post those letters now,” the posting of the letters is envisaged, but with a high degree of certainty of actualisation.

Another common kind of envisaging is when the event or state envisaged is known not to have been actualised. If I say, “Nick hasn’t a single clean sock in his drawer,” then I am envisaging a state in which there are clean socks in the drawer, and saying that this is not in fact the case. If I say, “Mary didn’t lose her cheque book after all,” I am probably referring to a previous situation which both I and my hearer had jointly envisaged, thinking it true: I am now saying that the losing of the cheque book was not actual—it is envisaged and denied in a breath.

In sections 16.4.1–16.4.6 envisaging is an essential factor in the relation between the two related units, but occurs only as an overlay on some other relation. The two envisaged events must have some causal or associative relationship holding between them; since causality merges almost imperceptibly into strong association, the relation can vary from completely binding to tenuous.

16.4.1 The condition-consequence relation

In the condition-consequence relation, there are two essential elements: envisaging and causality. The two envisaged events have a causal relationship between them such that the actualising of the first would carry with it the actualising of the second. Either both will be actualised, or neither will.

This potential for actualisation is normally unidirectional: one event (the condition) meets all the necessary requirements for the actualisation of the other. “If you work hard now, you’ll pass in May” makes sense, but “If you pass in May, you’ll work hard now” doesn’t. In other words, the condition-consequence relation has the same directionality as the underlying causal relation. It also exhibits the same prominence patterns.

“If you run fast, you’ll catch up with her” is conditionality overlaid on a means-purpose relationship, as in “Run fast, so that you will catch up with her.” The conditionality in “If he studies too much, he’ll become a recluse” is overlaid on a reason-result relationship. “If it doesn’t rain soon, the grass will wither” is based on a reason-result relation of the kind that does not involve human volition.

Sometimes the reason half of the relationship is envisaged, but is already known not to have been actualised. The deduction can then be made that the result part was not actualised either. This knowledge of the facts does not stop human beings from hypothesising (i.e., envisaging what might have happened but didn’t), as in “If it hadn’t rained, the grass would have withered” and “If you had worked hard, you would have done better.”

Of all the relations that can underlie conditionals the most tenuous is that of frequent association. Thus if Mary has been to France three times, and has had an accident with the car each time, we can say jokingly, “Better go to Spain this year, Mary. If you go to France, you’ll have a car crash.” The element of humour in the remark arises precisely because one is treating a purely associative relationship as if it were causal.

16.4.2 The associated condition-head relation

Some usages involving envisaged events are based not on causality but on some associative relation. The second element is not caused by the first; hence it cannot be called its consequence. Since there are a variety of relationships in which it can stand to its associated condition, we are simply calling it the head element.

16.4.2.1 The appropriate condition-head relation

Consider the example “If David comes, please heat up his dinner for him.”

This does not mean on condition that David comes. The situation obviously is that unless David comes there is no point in heating up his dinner: David’s arrival provides not only an appropriate context, but the only appropriate context, for heating it. But it does not cause the heating activity.

This relationship has another possible realisation in English. If the speaker considers that the conditional event will certainly take place, then “when” is used rather than “if.” Thus we say, “When I’ve finished this . . .” or “When the pass list is published . . .” and so on. The relationship is still that of appropriate context to a head: the certainty factor signalled by “when” is not part of the relationship as such, but is a prosody of the speaker’s envisaging of the event concerned.

16.4.2.2 The contingent condition-head relation

An example of a relation involving contingency is “If she isn’t in the kitchen, you’ll probably find her weeding the garden.” Here the relationship is not causal; absence from the kitchen does not cause anyone to weed gardens. Nor is the relationship one of appropriate context: at a different time of day, or in rainy weather, absence from the kitchen would probably be associated with quite different activities; it is a purely contingent matter. Associated conditions of this sort often, as here, trace back to an underlying alternation relationship: either she is in the kitchen or she is weeding the garden. Such an alternation assumes not only that the person concerned regularly performs certain activities, but also that all other possibilities have been ruled out so that only two remain. The source of the association lies in experience, not in necessity.

16.4.2.3 The stipulated condition-head relation

An example of a stipulated condition is “If he passes his exam, his grandmother will take him abroad this summer.” Here the grandson’s academic success cannot be considered the cause of his trip abroad, nor does success in examinations correlate regularly with foreign holidays either in the nature of things or in common experience. The sole source of the associative relation in this instance lies in the will of the grandmother: success is the condition of the holiday solely because she has determined that it shall be so, and she has the power to enforce her decision. It is a condition that she has stipulated.

These three types of associated condition do not exhaust the possibilities, but it is hoped that enough has been said to point the investigator in the right direction in assessing fresh examples.

16.4.3 Scope of conditionals

Although the examples used so far relate one condition to one consequence or associated event, a condition may also be applicable to a much larger stretch of the message. The analyst must always be aware of the scope of any conditional, and also of any devices in the language that specify the scope. In English, for example, when the consequence is stated before the condition (“The grass will wither if it doesn’t rain soon”), this usually means that the consequence is terminated at that point; the condition has no further scope. A condition with a long scope will normally occur initially without the option of inversion. In English these long-scope conditionals may be realised in some way other than by “if” (e.g., “Let us suppose that . . . ,” “On the hypothesis that . . . ,” “It is possible that . . .”) and so on.

16.4.4 The grounds-conclusion relation

In a grounds-conclusion relation the two propositions involved stand in a causal, associative, or alternation relation with each other. The grounds proposition is known to be true, and from this the speaker deduces that the conclusion is also true. The relation is therefore that of a deduction overlaid on some other relation. For example, “I forgot to set the timer on the oven!—the meal will be ruined” is based on a reason-result relation, but the result is at this point only deduced, and so envisaged as probable: it is not known for certain. “They must be away; the house is all locked up” represents a deductive overlay on a purely associative relationship: When they are at home, they do not lock their house up (familiar association). The house is all locked up (known fact: grounds); hence (I deduce that) they are away (deduced fact: conclusion). Whatever the underlying relation, the conclusion is naturally prominent.

Sometimes the fact that a deduction is being made is stated overtly, as in “From the state of your clothes, I conclude that you have been playing football.” But there are still only two propositions involved, not three: the known grounds are that the clothes are muddy and dishevelled; the deduced conclusion is that the addressee has been playing football. Like the previous example, this deduction is overlaid on a purely associative relation between muddy clothes and football. The words “I conclude that” do not realise referential content, but the grounds-conclusion relationship.

A deduction based on alternation can be more or less certain depending on the exclusiveness of the alternation. If the only two ways of getting to an island are by air and by boat, we can say with a fair degree of certainty, “She’s terribly afraid of air travel; she’ll be coming by boat.”

The grounds-conclusion relation is not necessarily presented in that order: “He obviously wants to keep in touch; he’s phoned her twice this week” realises the relation with the conclusion first.

There is often a great deal of ellipsed material clustering around the grounds-conclusion relationship: our deductions often assume shared knowledge of the world. Thus we say, “She’s very late getting back from work: she must have met Ryan again.” This assumes, without saying explicitly, that she regularly gets out of work on time, that she usually comes straight home, and that the only other occasions on which she was delayed were when she met Ryan. In communicating, we make explicit only those assumptions which are necessary for comprehension, especially any which do not belong to shared knowledge of the world. The grounds-conclusion relationship is, it must be remembered, a communication relation, and not a purely logical one.

16.4.5 The concession-contraexpectation relation

The concession-contraexpectation relation resembles the grounds-conclusion relation in that one proposition is deduced from another. In this case, however, the deduction fails: what actually occurs is not what was deduced, but something unexpected. This breaks the anticipated causal chaining. The unexpected element has natural prominence.

In English, “although” is commonly used to signal this relation, in which case the noneventuating expectation is given no overt mention. An example is “Although he was out of money, he did not ask for a loan.” Here the anticipated result of being out of money is a request for a loan, but this is not overtly stated. The fact that no such request was made is surprising and it is this unexpected outcome that is realised in the surface structure. The unfulfilled expectation in this case is widely shared throughout a community; sometimes, however, the expectation is only between speaker and hearer, as in “Although she put sugar in my tea, I drank every drop.”

In both of the preceding examples, the unexpected outcome was simply the negation of the expected one. Sometimes, however, the unexpected outcome is not the opposite of the expected one but a mutually exclusive alternative to it, as in “Although they should have attended the meeting, they spent a quiet evening at home instead.”

The concession-contraexpectation relation is frequently overlaid on an alternation relation, especially if the latter is considered exclusive.

“Although she was a proud, reserved woman, she had a wonderful way

with small children.”

“Although she had never shown any interest in music, she proved to

have a remarkably good ear.”

The element of contraexpectation here is confirmed by the fact that we never say, “She was proud and reserved and very good with children” or “She showed no interest in music and had a good ear.” The content of the two related propositions is not expected to co-occur; the alternatives are normally considered as mutually exclusive. Relations such as this, especially those where the alternatives are states, are on the boundaries of the concession-contraexpectation relation and the setting-incongruity relation (see section 17.1.2.3). This indeterminacy is to be expected, since there is an area of overlap between what is strongly associated in a community and what is considered causally related.

This relation is expressed in English in a variety of ways. Sometimes the surface indicator is in the concessive clause, as in

“Much as I like him, I can’t defend him this time.”

“In spite of the rain, the outing was a great success.”

“Exhausted though he was, he managed to turn his head and smile at

them.”

Other expressions of the same relation have the concession unmarked, but carry an overt relational indicator in the contraexpectation clause. This indicator consists of an initial “but” (usually obligatory) with or without some further word or phrase such as “anyway” or “just the same.” Examples are:

“The plan sounded flawless, but Nick remained unconvinced.”

“This is admittedly unfortunate, (but) nevertheless I advise continuing

our present policy.”

“He was far too late to catch her at home, but he headed in that

direction anyway.”

“The weather conditions were appalling, but they decided to press on

just the same.”

Sometimes the anticipated but non-eventuating result is expressed in full, in which case no relational indicators occur:

“She sprained her wrist badly last night, but will she go to the doctor?

No, off she goes to work as usual this morning.”

In this example the first clause is the concession, the second is the expected but noneventuating result (expressed indignantly), and the third is the contraexpectation, consisting of a mutually exclusive alternative.

In some languages such full expression is the normal or only way of expressing this relation.

16.4.6 The alternation relation

As with condition-consequence, the alternation relation involves both envisaging and causality, but in this instance the causal factor is simply that the two events or states referred to are mutually exclusive: if one occurs, then the other will not. The two alternatives have equal natural prominence.

Sometimes the degree of exclusiveness is complete, as in “Either the fuse will blow or the mains will trip out.” No further alternative is considered possible; if the fuse blows the mains will be unaffected, and vice versa. But more often the degree of exclusiveness is contingent upon circumstances or on factors in a shared knowledge of the world. In “They are going to buy a house in either Reading or Oxford,” the alternation is the choice of the people concerned (who have presumably rejected other possibilities). The fact that they are not going to buy a house in both places is a contingent fact, grounded both in their inability to do so (they can’t afford two houses) and in known custom (most people buy only one house).

The examples just considered involve envisaging alternatives in the future. Envisaging can also take place with respect to past events, provided that the actual course of events is unknown to the speaker. This is frequently the case where historical evidence is lacking, as in “Either he had no sons, or they did not survive him.” Without further evidence, we will never know. A contemporary example is “She’s either gone to Paris on holiday or to Wales on that field course. I don’t know which she decided.”

When the alternatives are contingent, the two parts of the alternation are not always mutually exclusive in a totally watertight way. Our experience of life makes us aware that some alternatives are more mutually exclusive than others. “You can either wash the car or weed the garden” is not an absolute guarantee that the person addressed will not end up doing both. The point is that whether or not the alternatives completely exclude each other in this instance, the speaker is presenting them as doing so at the moment of communication.

Ellipsis in the surface structure is common in English with the alternation relation, as in the house-buying example. What we really mean is Either they will buy a house in Reading or they will buy a house in Oxford. It is always the fuller form that is represented in propositions: “Either John or David will get the part” realises two propositions, not one. In many languages the shared element in an alternation cannot be elided as in English.

Another somewhat misleading feature of English is that the connectives “either . . . or” sometimes signal relations other than alternation. In the example “All the students in this class learn either French or German,” there is mutual exclusiveness but no envisaging. Classification is involved here, but not alternation. In the negative example “He is neither selfish nor rebellious,” there is no relationship of alternation between selfishness and rebelliousness; the meaning is he is-not selfish and he is-not rebellious.

16.5 Reporting relations

A speaker or writer usually communicates his own thoughts and feelings, his own mind set. If he reports someone else’s mind set, then the change has to be made obvious, to avoid confusion. This gives rise to a distinctive set of relations in which one element always consists of speech or cognition, while the other indicates the speaker, thinker or perceiver.

16.5.1 The orienter-speech relation

The orienter-speech relation occurs when what someone says or said is reported. There are always two elements present: the orienter, which makes clear who spoke, and the speech, which represents what the speaker originally said, though not always exactly. In “Nigel said he’d be back by coffee break” the orienter is “Nigel said” and the speech is “he’d be back by coffee break.” This, of course, is not what Nigel actually said; what he said was “I’ll be back by coffee break,” or possibly something else which meant much the same.

In English there are two possible forms in which speech can be reported. If the exact words are repeated, then “I” does not mean the writer but the quoted speaker, and verb tenses also keep their original form. But sometimes that would be unnatural. “Nigel said, ‘I will be back by coffee break’” might well leave the hearer confused. In languages which, like English, have both direct and indirect forms of quotation, it is important to note when each form is appropriate: they will rarely be freely interchangeable. The two surface-structure forms realise only one referential relation, orienter-speech. Other factors such as the length, style or formality of the quoted material determine the surface form: the meaning relation is the same in either case. The quoted speech has natural prominence.

When the identity of the speaker is unmistakable, the orienter may be omitted; it has zero realisation. This usually occurs when only two speakers are involved, particularly when what is said is in itself enough to identify the speaker. A narrative passage in English may consist of a series of exchanges, with the speakers identified only at the beginning. (“Tom asked Alex to do his newspaper round for him, but Alex was reluctant to oblige. ‘No, sorry,’ he said, ‘too much homework.’ ‘Oh, go on, just this once.’ ‘No, honestly. And I have football after school as well.’ ‘Couldn’t you do the round afterwards?’ ‘No, but Ben might.’”) An analysis of the relations in this stretch of narrative would include the orienter each time, as the appropriate speaker is clearly meant although not formally identified.

16.5.2 The orienter-cognition relation

The orienter-cognition relation occurs when what someone thinks, feels or perceives is reported. “We heard the first cuckoo in late April”; “She remembered that it was early closing day”; “They will be glad you came.” Since thoughts may have any import, any import may be reported. “They plan to move house in spring” reports thoughts of volitional import; “Her parents approve of her changing course” reports thoughts of expressive import; “Everyone knows he has gone to London” reports thoughts of factual import. Thoughts are accompanied by varying emotions, which can be reported in the same way: “My friends were amazed at how quickly I recovered”; “We are perplexed that he hasn’t come back.”

As the examples show, we have in English many different reporting words to express the orienting function: “realise,” “hope,” “decide,” “guess,” “wonder,” etc. We also use the verb “to be” with certain adjectives such as “pleased,” “eager,” “puzzled,” etc. But, strictly speaking, the emotion or volition which is expressed in the orienter belongs to the content. “He was relieved that she was safe” is our way of saying that his thought She is safe was accompanied by a feeling of relief. “She was determined to become headmistress” means that she was thinking I will become headmistress with a strong accompanying intention. Some languages manage very well with only a few orienters, by the simple expedient of including the accompanying emotion or volition in the content: “He thought, she has surprisingly got back in time” or “He thought, I am surprised, she has got back in time.”

16.5.3 The quotation-source relation

The quotation-source relation is similar to the other reporting relations. The “orienter” is a quoted source showing where information or a quotation has come from; what is quoted may be just a few words, or an entire book review. The quoted element does not represent the thought content of the writer, but of someone else. Examples are Barefoot 24 and Shellfish 3, which give the source for the information provided in the rest of the article.

16.5.4 A possible confusion: First person prosodies

There are certain first-person utterances which appear superficially to express a reporting relation, but which in fact do not: they express prosodies. What might seem to be an orienter is a first-person form that is virtually redundant, as in “I tell you, it’s too late.” Such quasi-redundant forms relate either to the import of the main proposition, or to its certainty or uncertainty, or to the emotion accompanying it.

“I insist that you go” is simply a command to someone to go. By saying “I insist” the speaker strengthens the command: the prosody relates to the import, confirming and intensifying it. The first person element carries no referential meaning: the speaker is not talking about insisting, but expressing an attitude of insistence. In the same way, “It’s raining, I tell you” reinforces an assertion, and “I consider him to be very reliable” reinforces an evaluation.

Similar first person prosodies express the speaker’s estimate of the certainty or uncertainty of the information expressed: “I am convinced that this is the solution” means This is (certainly) the solution. “I don’t expect him to come today” means He will (probably) not come today.

When relating to the emotion accompanying the main proposition, the apparent orienter may express or reinforce the speaker’s emotion, or it may be directed towards the anticipated emotion of the addressee:

Expressing speaker’s emotion You’ve ruined it, I tell you!

(indignation)

Mitigating, towards addressee She won’t be coming back, I’m

afraid. (mitigating unwelcome

information)

Enhancing, towards addressee She won’t be coming back, I

assure you. (reinforcing

welcome information)

Since in all these cases the two surface-structure clauses express only one proposition, such a usage does not really belong in this chapter. But because it is easily confused with reporting relations, it is mentioned at this point to prevent confusion.

16.6 A worked example: The Picnic

16.6.1 General procedures and conventions

The relations discussed in this chapter will now be illustrated as they show up in a time-based text. Because we have not yet studied propositions, the relations will be shown as linking surface-structure clauses or larger units. This is just a device for illustrative purposes: the relations we have been discussing are cognitive relations, and link cognitive units, i.e., propositions and configurations. The substitution of clauses for propositions works very well when higher-level units are being studied, and also at lower levels if clauses and propositions are in a one-to-one relationship with each other. But this technique cannot be used effectively with condensed and elliptical texts, in which one clause realises several propositions.

Our procedure in the analysis will be to divide the text into its major units, so as to have a ready overview of the structure of the whole, and thereafter to study the individual propositions/clauses in each of these units to see how each one relates to its neighbours and to the text as a whole. In its original form our text consists of a single surface-structure paragraph, hence ideally its layered relations should be plotted on one large diagram, thus giving a clear view of its interrelations at all levels. But such a diagram is very complex, and could initially be confusing to the student. For this reason, then, as well as for reasons of space, we will here present the analysis in several stages, first showing an overview and then discussing each major unit separately.

The following conventions are used:

(1) Propositions/clauses are listed on the right of the display in the order in which they appear in the text.

(2) Each proposition/clause has a horizontal line to its left, appropriately labelled to represent the relation(s) it enters into.

(3) If two or more propositions combine to form one configuration, the appropriate horizontal lines are joined by a vertical line. Short vertical lines therefore represent small configurations, and long vertical lines, found further left, represent large configurations.

(4) Any label to the left of a vertical line applies to the entire configuration signalled by that line, including all lower-level configurations.

(5) In any configuration (i.e., in any grouping of two or more propositions or configurations together) the labels of prominent relations are in capitals.

(6) A relation–bearing horizontal line joins a vertical configuration line opposite its most prominent constituent, or at the midpoint between two constituents of equal prominence.

The relational display is arranged in this way so as to give maximal visual representation to the relational patterns of the text. By starting from the left and reading the diagram to the right, the reader can see at a glance what are the main elements in the text under consideration, since these are reached by direct horizontal lines from the left to the propositions concerned. On the other hand, the function of any given proposition can easily be traced by starting at the right and working leftwards, thus seeing the proposition in increasingly inclusive contexts. The primary function of any proposition within the text as a whole is given by its leftmost label: the more important the function, the further to the left is the label.

The following text, The Picnic, will serve to illustrate the analytical procedure.

(1) The Rat brought the boat alongside the bank,

(2) made her fast,

(3) helped the still awkward Mole safely ashore,

(4) and swung out the luncheon basket.

(5) The Mole begged as a favour

(6) to be allowed to unpack it all by himself;

(7) and the Rat was very pleased to indulge him,

(8) and to sprawl at full length on the grass

(9) and rest,

(10) while his excited friend shook out the tablecloth

(11) and spread it,

(12) took out all the mysterious packets one by one

(13) and arranged their contents in due order,

(14) still gasping,

(15) “O my! O my!”

(16) at each fresh revelation.

(17) When all was ready,

(18) the Rat said,

(19) “Now pitch in, old fellow!”

(20) and the Mole was indeed very glad to obey,

(21) for he had started his spring-cleaning at a very early hour that morning,

(22) as people will do,

(23) and had not paused

(24) for bite or sup;

(25) and he had been through a very great deal since that distant time

(26) which now seemed so many days ago.

16.6.2 Determining the major configurations and their relations

The first step in determining the major units in a text is to read the text through several times in order to assess its main pattern of development, whether logical, chronological or associative. The Picnic text is obviously chronologically structured around time relations. Major units in time-based texts are usually developed according to a stimulus-response or a step-goal pattern. This text consists of various steps towards the goal of a picnic meal: this is confirmed by the larger context of the passage. We are therefore looking for a high-level structure with a step-goal pattern of development.

To establish major configurations we look for stretches of text that exhibit referential unity internally; concepts from the same referential area appear repeatedly throughout. Such a unit contrasts with adjacent stretches of text, which realise different concepts. We also look for any clear indications of breaks between stretches. In a time-based text we would expect to find gaps between activity spans, or some other break in continuity in the chaining of events (e.g., a step-goal chain reaching its goal and another chain starting).

We look first, then, for clear breaks between units: the first we find is between segments 4 and 5. Segment 4 ends an activity span with Rat as the agent and segment 5 starts a new activity span with Mole as its initiator. The second clear break is between segments 16 and 17. Segment 16 is at the end of a series of events with Mole as the agent, and segment 17 indicates that this event series is now completed and forms the launching pad for the next chain.

Next we look for internal unity within these major stretches. We discover that segments 1–4 show referential unity—Rat is the agent throughout—and also relational unity in that there is a single activity span of successive events, moving towards the goal of getting the whole boating party (including the luncheon basket) ashore.

Segments 5–16 are much more diverse: attention switches from Mole to Rat and back again. These stretches should therefore, from the point of view of content, be considered as either separate units, or sub-units. Relational factors, however, point to our considering the whole of 5–16 as one unit: 5–6 acts simultaneously as the stimulus to the response of 7–9 and as the initiating step towards the goal of 10–16. The use of “while” (10) indicates that the whole of 10–16 is simultaneous with 7–9, the Mole unpacking the basket while Rat relaxes nearby. We therefore consider segments 5–16 as one complex unit, the details to be analysed later.

Segments 17–26 are similarly complex in content, with first Rat and then Mole as agent. But, as with 5–16, this stretch seems to be relationally unitary. Segments 17–19 act as a stimulus to which segment 20 is the response, thus forming a natural chain. Segments 21–26 are clearly in a supporting role to segment 20, hence they could well be taken as a sub-unit attached to it, but they could not form a major unit on their own.

Having identified 1–4, 5–16, and 17–26 as the major configurations in the text, we expect to have this confirmed by their each having a clear relational function. In fact, their function is the one anticipated above, that of step-step-goal. Configuration 1–4 sees the luncheon basket unloaded, and configuration 5–16 sees it unpacked—both necessary steps to the goal of actually eating the picnic, in configuration 17–26.

This is further confirmed by the surface structure: the passage consists of only three sentences, and each sentence corresponds to one of the major configurations which we have identified.

The relational structure of the Picnic text may be diagrammed by providing, on the right, a thematic summary of each configuration and, on the left, the labels of the relational function of the respective configurations:

1–4 Arrival; the basket unloaded

5–16 The basket unpacked

17–26 The picnic begun

Had this text been schematically developed, the leftmost labels would have been schema labels, but since it is not a tension-based text, the labels are of referential relations. (The step2 label might at a later stage be replaced by step2 in view of its degree of special prominence—see section 16.6.4, segments 12 and 13.)

16.6.3 The first major configuration: relational display

The first unit (segments 1–4) consists of a sequence of events of which Rat is the agent. It would be possible to analyse them as simply a chronological sequence (seq1, seq2, seq3, . . .), but the step-goal analysis is preferred because of the purposiveness of the whole text, and because of the extra prominence on “luncheon basket” due to its final position and to its recurrence in later segments.

1 The Rat brought the boat alongside the bank,

2 made her fast

3 helped the still awkward Mole safely ashore

4 and swung out the luncheon basket.

16.6.4 The second major configuration: relational display

(5) The Mole begged as a

favour

(6) to be allowed to unpack it

all by himself;

(7) and the Rat was very

pleased to indulge him,

(8) and to sprawl at full length

on the grass

(9) and rest,

(10) while his excited friend

shook out the tablecloth

(11) and spread it,

(12) took out all the mysterious

packets one by one

(13) and arranged their contents

in due order,

(14) still gasping,

(15) “O my! O my!”

(16) at each fresh revelation.

The second unit, segments 5–16, shows a much more complex layering of relations. The procedure, as ever, is to look first for the main pattern of development, which is found in the Mole’s request and subsequent activity. His request to be allowed to unpack the basket (segments 5 and 6) constitutes the initial step towards the setting out of the picnic (segments 12 and 13) which is the goal.

The relational display is set out so that this step and goal are readily identifiable as the leftmost items, with lines leading directly (without diversion vertically) to the appropriate propositions. When less prominent details (Rat’s acquiescence, for example, and the shaking of the tablecloth) are joined to these in the relational network, it can be seen that the entire unit takes its structure from this step-goal development (see convention 4, section 16.6.1).

The second procedural step is to transfer our focus to the segments themselves, and to link together, at the right side of the display, any pairs of segments closely connected by their content and/or grammar. Thus segment 14 (“still gasping”) and segment 15 (“‘O my! O my!’”) are closely linked as orienter and speech, as are segments 5 and 6. Indeed, in this particular relationship, the propositions concerned combine to form what is referentially one event. Segments 8 and 9 can be linked as simultaneous events closely joined grammatically (“and” followed by zero subject), as can segments 12 and 13, though both pairs require further discussion as to the nature of the simultaneity. Similar grammatical factors enable us to link segments 10 and 11 as a close-knit event sequence.

With the highest-level and lowest-level relations now sketched in, it remains to link these in a display that exhibits clearly the relational network. As before, this is best achieved by looking at higher-level and lower-level patterns in turn. At the higher level, once Mole’s request has been granted, the two animals act simultaneously according to the agreed division of labour. This would indicate a clear separation in the network between segments 9 and 10, i.e., between Rat’s activity and Mole’s. At the lower level, segment 7 relates very closely to 5 and 6, being Rat’s response to Mole’s request. Segment 16 relates to the configuration 14–15 as its stimulus. At this stage, then, each segment is clearly related to some other segment or configuration, a major break is posited between segments 9 and 10, and the main pattern is considered to be step-goal.

The mid-level interrelations of the network are completed by repeating the above procedures. They are exhibited in the relational display and are commented on, where necessary, in the notes which follow. First, however, it is necessary to say a few words about the conventions employed.

The conventions employed in the display. The conventions listed in 16.6.1 apply throughout. Two further conventions are required to display the complex interrelations of events and states in the present text. The first concerns simultaneous relations, which are normally signalled by subscript numerals (simull . . . simul2). This notation would be misleading if applied to segments 8 and 9, which do not realise two simultaneous events, but one event described under two aspects, the physical (sprawled at full length) and the psychological (resting). The use of successive numerals is therefore replaced by a cross-referencing notation, in which segment 8 is labelled as being simultaneous, in some sense, with 9 (simul/9), and segment 9 correspondingly with 8 (simul/8).

The same notation is employed in a problem that rises with the layered simultaneity relations in segments 10–16. Although the primary relation of 16 is to 14–15 as their stimulus, it relates also to 12 and 13 as being simultaneous with them, and this should not be lost sight of. Both relations are therefore marked on the 16 line, with stimulus, as primary, occurring to the left of simul/12, 13.

The other convention introduced here involves iterative events. In segments 12–16 it is not a single event but an event sequence that is repeated, the sequence consisting of taking out and opening packages and arranging their contents. Two factors make it necessary to handle this in the display rather than in the normal manner by the lexical items in the content. The first is that the iterativeness is given considerable prominence by the author, who signals it by “one by one” (12), “in due order” (13), and “at each fresh revelation” (16). The second is that the order of the events as reported in the text is not the same as the order in which they must have taken place. Text order is taking out, arranging and opening, in segments 12, 13, and 16: “real” time requires, of course, that the opening of a packet took place before the arranging of its contents, giving the order 12, 16, 13. The chronological factor in 16 is considerably downgraded both by its syntax (“at each fresh revelation” is a peripheral phrase in a subordinate clause) and by the lexical selection of an abstract noun (“revelation”) to realise the event of opening the packets, rather than a verb form. Nevertheless, departure from strict chronology is usually employed for good stylistic reasons, and should therefore be noted. This is done by using the labels iter1, iter2, and iter3. The lack of prominence on the chronological factor is indicated in the display by the occurrence of these labels in the rightmost position.

Notes on the display. The labels employed are, it is hoped, self-explanatory, but some further comments are provided where they illuminate either analytical procedures or the author’s stylistic choices.

Mole’s request in 5–6 is considered to be more prominent than Rat’s responses, hence the label stimulus is in capitals. This reflects the facts that the request is stated in much more detail than is the response “very pleased to indulge him,” and that Rat’s resultant activity (sprawling and resting) is expressed much more briefly than is Mole’s excited activity of unpacking the basket (10–16).

Segments 7–9 form a close-knit unit grammatically, since “very pleased” is followed by three infinitives, “indulge,” sprawl,” and “rest.” Segments that are so closely linked grammatically are not usually separated relationally, but at least a minimal separation has to be maintained here since segments 8 and 9 are simultaneous both with each other and with segments 10–16 (signalled by “while”), whereas segment 7 (in which Rat gives Mole permission to unpack the basket) must clearly precede them all.

Segment 10 marks the beginning of the goal configuration (10–16), which consists of Mole’s excited activity. At first glance, segments 10–13 seem to consist of a straight chronological sequence—Mole shakes out the tablecloth, spreads it, takes out the packets of food and arranges them. But on closer inspection the sequence exhibits some complexities. The omission of “and” at the beginning of segment 12 (cf. segments 11 and 13) indicates a grouping within the series, and this is confirmed by the fact that “shook out” (10) and “spread” (11) are punctiliar events, whereas “took out” (12) and “arranged” (13) are iterative. Moreover, segments 12–13 (unpacking the picnic) undoubtedly constitute the main goal Mole had in mind in making his request, hence they require a relational label with considerably more prominence than 10 and 11. The chronological sequence between 10, 11, and 12–13 is not, however, entirely lost. It is carried by the step1 . . . step2 . . . goal relationship at the second layer from the left.

The relationship between segments 12–13 and segments 14–16 is twofold: the unpacking is the stimulus to the excited response, but the two activities are also simultaneous, inasmuch as Mole gasps exclamations throughout the unpacking process. It is unusual to have the response simultaneous with the stimulus, but when the two events are coextensive over a period of time a stimulus-response relationship between them is obviously possible.

Segments 12 and 13 are prominent as being the head of the goal configuration: this is signalled both by their content and by the fact that they are expressed as main clauses, whereas configuration 14–16 has a participial clause as its head. In the light of this, the fact that response (opposite line 15) is marked as prominent might be considered surprising. But its prominence does not arise from grammatical considerations. Rather, its grammatical nonprominence is outweighed by other factors: the word “gasping” carries inherent lexical prominence; “O my! O my!” is the only direct speech in the 5–16 configuration; exclamations are almost always prominent. In addition, the chronological skewing of 12, 13 and 16 is almost certainly employed to give extra prominence to 14–15. Instead of occurring between 12 and 13 in strict chronological time, 14–15 come after the structural peak of 12–13 and constitute a balancing emotional peak that ends the unit. Thus, “excited” in 10 and “O my! O my!” in 15 form a sort of emotional/prosodic sandwich structure, the enclosed element consisting of Mole’s reported activities. Seen in terms of our study of theme in 15.6.3, the structural theme and the prosodic theme of the configuration jointly reach their most prominent point in segments 12–16. The downgrading of prominence in 16 effectively gives the prosodic theme the final position of maximum impact.

16.6.5 The third major configuration: relational display

(17) When all was ready,

(18) the Rat said,

(19) “Now pitch in, old fellow!”

(20) and the Mole was indeed very glad to

obey,

(21) for he had started his spring-cleaning at a

very early hour that morning,

(22) as people will do,

(23) and had not paused

(24) for bite or sup;

(25) and he had been through a very great deal

since that distant time

(26) which now seemed so many days ago.

The third major configuration (17–26) is more straightforward in its relational structure. When the picnic is spread out and ready, Rat invites Mole to start eating, and Mole gladly does so. The rest of the unit (21–26) is taken up with the reason for Mole’s eagerness to eat, and this involves a flashback over Mole’s day to this point. In other words, the event series in “real” time ends at 20: this is indicated by the use of causality labelling rather than time-based labelling in segments 20 to 26.

The relational display is fairly self-explanatory, although some of the relations involved will not be studied until the next chapter. There are, however, a few points of interest that should be noted.

Segment 17 is interesting because strictly speaking, it faces both ways. It marks the end of the sequence of events in 10–16, and it is the circumstance of Rat’s invitation in 19. Such a double function is often found at the boundary between two units and is, in fact, a signal of such a boundary. The grammar ties it in closely with the third configuration, however. Moreover, it has a further function with respect to the material that follows: cognitively, it subsumes under itself the whole development of the previous configuration, and signals this as the background to the new unit just starting. It thus makes a smooth topical transition between the two units.

Segment 22 is an authorial comment—an amused and tolerant comment—not on the structure and development of the message as with the signposts in Barefoot, but simply on a part of the content. As such it is a kind of aside, and not really part of the relational pattern at all. If such a comment is made concerning a large and complex unit, and is therefore labelled at a high level (i.e. well to the left) in the display, the relationship should be signalled by a dotted horizontal line, not a solid one. Solid lines running well to the left should be kept for important structural relations as here, where the longest left-to-right line leads straight to the head of the whole configuration, segment 20. In fact this is the head of the whole text, for the entire text consists of steps to the goal of the picnic, and at 20 the picnic begins.

Segments 21–26 constitute a series of three reasons why Mole was so glad to start eating. Each reason consists of a pair of propositions/clauses, but with different relations between the paired segments, thus preventing monotony in presentation.

It is worth asking ourselves why this text, which has been primarily a narration of successive events in a step-goal relationship, should finish with no less than six segments off the eventline. This can only be answered by referring to the larger context. The chapter (and the book) begin with Mole’s abandoning his spring-cleaning and emerging into the outside world. Thereafter the delights of that world unfold; this sudden reference back to the spring-cleaning emphasises the contrast between Mole’s two worlds, the old world now seeming very distant indeed (25–26).

Such a high-level link-up of content combined with a distinct break in the eventline would normally signal a major structural break. This is the case here. The break in the event sequence is continued after this paragraph, for the actual eating of the meal is never mentioned: the next paragraph starts with the two animals replete and content. And after this gap in the succession of events, a new major section of the chapter begins. Up to this point Mole and Rat have been the only two participants, but as soon as the picnic is over a succession of other animals appears, to whom Mole is introduced in turn. The goal of the picnic has been achieved; new actors now come on stage.

17

PRESENTATIONAL RELATIONS

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17.5 A worked example: Daffodil Leaves 2–12

17.5.1 The relational display and conventions

17.5.2 Comments on the relational analysis

17.5.3 Comments on prominence

In chapter 16 we saw a variety of referential relations. In the chapter before us we are going to consider relations that arise not so much from the referential material of the message as from the way in which the communicator chooses to present it. These presentational relations differ from those already discussed with respect both to their source and to their functions in messages.

17.1 Associative relations

Associative relations have their source in our rational capacity for sorting and categorising. We correlate things and events and situations in certain ways: we equate them, classify them, compare them. We have the capacity to abstract one quality from an object or event and use it as the basis for classification or comparison. We have the capacity to zoom in on detail or to step back and view from a distance. These rational capacities enable us to associate very diverse experiences in a variety of coherent and consistent ways, and thus give rise to the various associative relations in messages.

Associative relations function very differently in messages from chronological or causal relations with their various overlays. Associative relations do not move a message forward. They are used where a message sender wants to dwell for a moment on one particular point and expand upon it or in some other way make sure that what he is trying to communicate is getting across effectively. Normally, therefore, they are not part of the core of the message, but relate to it: they provide settings, explanations, enhancing detail. Whereas the message core moves forward, the associated material stands still while elaborating.

Some messages, however, consist almost entirely of referential material in associative relations. These are messages which present facts, but which do not have any schema. Their import is factual, but there is no tension-related progression. The material is arranged associatively.

17.1.1 Equivalence relations

An equivalence relation involves saying virtually the same thing again in a different way. In other words, both the referential content and the import of the two units concerned are the same or closely similar—nothing is added in the second unit except vividness and prominence. It is a paraphrase relationship. The paraphrase commonly takes one of the following forms:

Paraphrase by synonym “She is an excellent teacher. She

does a first-class job in the

classroom.”

Paraphrase by negation “They remained motionless. They

of antonym didn’t stir.”

Paraphrase by negation “The light is at red, not green.”

of situational alternative

Note that the latter kind of paraphrase relation holds only with exclusive alternatives, i.e. when no other option is possible in the circumstances. (If I had said to a friend, “His sweater is red, not green,” I would have been correcting a previous error, not paraphrasing.) Note also that in this example the second underlying proposition is realised by a phrase, not by a clause.

An interesting question arises here. If two propositions in an equivalence relation have identical referential content, as is frequently the case, then would it not be better to say that there is only one proposition in the meaning structure, not two? Our instinctive reaction usually is, yes, that would make sense referentially, yet we would lose something. Consider again the earlier example “They remained motionless. They didn’t stir.” It could be claimed that one proposition underlies these two clauses: They continued not moving at all. There seems to be no referential material in the two clauses which is not also in this proposition; yet we feel that the proposition is conveying less than the surface structure did.

This, of course, is the case. A proposition always conveys less than the surface structure because it conveys only the referential content and the import concerned, nothing else. Any other factors, such as special prominence, or the emotion accompanying the message, have to be added as a separate prosody—often at a higher level, if more than one proposition is affected.

In most examples of equivalence, some such prosodic factor is involved. The problem is that repetition is used for such a variety of purposes: it could be, for instance, to correct an error or mishearing, to add emphasis, to slow down the information rate, or to alert the hearer to expect this to be thematic—the possibilities are endless, and vary from language to language. If we reduce the two equivalent clauses to one proposition, we must be careful to add to it a tag indicative of the purpose and function of the repetition.

In the example just quoted it seems that the repetition (“. . . remained motionless . . . didn’t stir”) fulfils two functions. One is intensification: not only did they not move, they did not make any small movements at all. This is of course a referential matter, which we have tried to include in the proposition by using at all: nevertheless, it is often hard to express such referential refinements within one proposition.

The other function of the repetition in this example is to heighten tension: the reader is left waiting with bated breath, wondering what is to come. Hence the significance tag for the single underlying proposition would in this case have to be “intensification, tension-building.” If an actual context were known it is quite possible that the tag would need to be extended further.

17.1.2 Compatibility relations

Almost all the relations discussed in chapter 16 depend upon an undergirding compatibility relation. In using the sequential relation, for example, we take for granted the compatibility of the successive events. If sequence in time is the only relation, we find this perplexing. If presented with “On Monday my aunt went home, on Tuesday there was an oil spill disaster, on Wednesday there was an electricity cut in Thorby-in-the-Marsh,” we grope mentally for some linking thread, convinced that it ought to be there. The causal and envisaging relations are likewise built on underlying compatibility.

Because our attention is normally focused on these other factors, compatibility as such rarely if ever appears in a relational diagram. We become aware of the compatibility issue only on the rare occasions when the relation is broken.

Compatibility is based essentially on frequent co-occurrence in similar situations: our cognitive frames hold millions of such associations. If one element is mentioned, we expect other related elements to occur also, or at least we are not surprised if they do. For example, we associate having a good ear and loving music. These are not causally connected, but they have a high compatibility: we are surprised if they do not co-occur.

Compatible elements are often related in almost stereotyped ways. In descriptions, for example, we get something like this: “She lived in a suburban semi on a housing estate. The windows were double-glazed, the garden tidy. It was conveniently near the station. The neighbours were friendly . . .” Here the description starts off with a whole-part relation (house, windows, garden), and moves imperceptibly into the area of compatibility when the station and the neighbours are mentioned. But this is not merely addition: it has a closeness of association that is absent from “She lived in a suburban semi. Six different species of ant were found in the garden. The next-door neighbour enjoyed crosswords.”

Compatibility often seems to relate to an expected pattern of factors. Because of frequent co-occurrence we establish a sort of mental template according to which certain features of a situation are picked out for mention, often in a certain order. Thus in describing an object we mention its size, shape, colour, and purpose; in describing an event we specify the participants involved, its cause, and its results. The suburban house in the example was roughly described in terms of widening spatial relations. If it was being offered for sale, other factors such as the number of bedrooms would have had obligatory mention.

The number of such mental templates is vast. It is usually possible to specify whether the progression is spatial, temporal, classificatory or from some other source, but in practice we normally accept the template as a given and state the relation as additive.

17.1.2.1 The additive relation

The additive relation is essentially the relation of listing, when one element is added to another forming a series, without any variation in structural relations between them. It is probably the commonest relation in nonschematic messages (see sections 12.4.1.1 and 12.4.2.1 for examples).

In schematic messages the additive relation is much less common, since layered structuring is the norm. It is found, though, whenever two or more propositions or configurations relate to a head in the same way, as when two or more reasons relate to one result. The relation between the supporting units and the head is the main one (hence is labelled), while the relation between the supporting units themselves is additive. Obviously the supporting units are compatible, and since they make identical contributions to the structure, the additive relation is appropriate.

It is also possible for head elements to be in an additive relationship with each other. This occurs when there are several head elements not otherwise related, but having a similar function within the message. (There is an example of this in the Daffodil Leaves text, (see sections 17.5.1 and 17.5.2).) Once more, these are compatible within the topic area, but this is not asserted as a relation: referential compatibility underlies a message but does not in itself structure it.

17.1.2.2 The proportionality relation

The proportionality relation is found when two compatible elements are considered to be in some sense of equal value, balancing each other. It is encountered frequently in everyday conversation, as in “If you will write to the gas company, I’ll deal with the rest of the correspondence.” The two activities are considered proportional, appropriately balanced. Sometimes the two propositions refer to situations not normally associated with each other at all, but which are associated on this occasion because the message-sender considers them comparable in value. Again, this is often encountered in conversation, as in “If you will take the youth group on Saturday, I’ll service your car for you next week.” There is no inherent relationship between the youth group and the car, but in that specific situation the two elements are considered as matching each other in value, hence are made the basis for a conditional offer. Still another example is “They charged sixpence for admission in those days” (people used to pay sixpence so that they might enter). Here the proportionality relation is overlaid by purpose.

17.1.2.3 The incongruity relation

The relation of incongruity occurs when an expectation is established that is not fulfilled; instead, something unusual, odd, or puzzling follows. Some fact or situation acts as a setting and establishes an area of compatibility, but what comes next falls outside that area and is in some way disproportionate or surprising. It still makes sense, but it is unexpected sense. The two elements standing in this relation can therefore be labelled setting-incongruity.

An example of the incongruity relation is “The more she studied, the less she remembered.” Here, the setting is “The more she studied.” This gives rise to a range of expected conclusions compatible with increasing study, such as “the more tired she became” or “the less social life she enjoyed.” But the actual conclusion does not fall within the anticipated area; it is unexpected, even unlikely. Our sense of the fitness of things is disturbed.

A further example of incongruity might be “She is ever so competent and efficient, but she totally fails to discipline her children.” The speaker obviously considers lax discipline to be incongruous in a setting characterised by competence.

There are several main uses of this relation. The first is that whenever we observe anything incongruous we try to explain it. So this relation is often the stimulus of an explanatory message, whether or not the explanation is successfully provided later. Thus in the Multiple Sclerosis text the fact that the disease occurs more frequently in high latitudes seems incongruous—it is a sufficiently odd correlation to require an explanation, since most diseases do not correlate with latitude in this way. Notice that in this instance the setting element is absent from the surface structure; the writer assumes that medical readers can supply it. But the analysis has to include the element of incongruity, as it provides the motivation for the whole of the rest of the message.

Often incongruity forms the basis of a contrast which is not strictly formal (i.e., not of the form X is Z, Y is not Z) but which constitutes a telling element in an argument. Thus the last line of the Radon text is in an incongruity relationship with the content of the previous line. There had obviously been a public outcry about the lipstick dye orange 19: had the grounds simply been that it was carcinogenic, this would perhaps have been reasonable. But that it was carcinogenic in one instance out of 20 billion makes the outcry incongruous. There is a disproportionality between the outcry over orange 19 and the lack of concern about radon: they don’t match up. Note that this is more than simply a contrast between the two different reactions: it is a contrast which the writer obviously considers inappropriate, even ridiculous.

The incongruity relation is, of course, a frequent ingredient in humour, but the examples above show that not all incongruity is humorous. Humour probably requires other accompanying factors in addition, such as unexpectedness, unintended result, certain emotions, etc.

17.1.3 Classification relations

The classification relations are class-membership relations: either a classifying statement is followed by a specific example, or else a specific statement precedes a classifying one. The first realises a generic-specific relation, the second specific-generic. It is possible to attach several specifics to one generic: it is not of necessity a paired relation. It is often found in textbooks, where numerous examples are given to students as practice in connection with some general point of teaching.

Some examples are:

“She was ever so kind to me that day: she lent me a hanky, made me a

cup of tea, and stayed with me till Joe came in.”

(generic-3 specifics)

“His unit was put on stand-by: the whole army was on the alert.”

(specific-generic)

Neither the generic nor its associated specifics carry inherent prominence; rather, one or the other is more prominent in a particular context. This is very clearly evidenced in cases where the generic precedes a single specific, as in, “Young audiences like to participate (as they do, for example, in Peter Pan) . . .” In this instance, nothing more is likely to be said about Peter Pan: the generic carries greater prominence. Contrast this, however, with the following: “People who are in a hurry are often careless, and Betty that day was no exception.” Here the generic element simply acts as an introduction to the specific, which is the prominent element.

Languages vary greatly in their use of generic and specific statements. In the West we tend to avoid long lists of specifics, or at least to precede or follow them with a generic which ties them all together with a neat summary. But in some languages the generic would be considered repetitious and inappropriate if the specifics had already been given. It is also important to notice how newness of information relates to generics and specifics: specifics which are new may be acceptable, whereas specifics readily deduced from a preceding generic may better be left to be understood.

17.1.4 Amplification relations

When the second of two units either assumes or repeats the content of the first, adding some extra detail, this is an amplification relation. The extra detail can be a qualitative description (of a thing), or the time, place, or manner (of an event), or a specifying, in extra detail, of any element in the relational frame of an event.

The thing-description relation is not common in European languages, in which information patterns are heavily nucleated. Descriptions in such languages are commonly carried by nominal phrases rather than by related clauses. The thing-description relation is found more commonly in languages with an additive informational style.

Some examples are:

“The man turned round. The old man turned. Grey-haired was the man,

but still strong. He turned and looked at the boy.” (thing-quality)

“He departed in high spirits, whistling as he went.” (event-manner)

“They’ve gone off on holiday. They left for Yugoslavia yesterday.”

(event-specifier of place and time)

In some cases this relation may be difficult to distinguish from generic-specific, but amplification is the relation of increasing detail, without any classifying element involved.

17.1.5 Relations based on comparisons

Comparisons occur when two things or events are compared with respect to a shared quality or characteristic. The first thing or event, traditionally called the topic, is foregrounded conceptually, and the shared quality is attributed to it, thus forming the head proposition. The shared quality recurs in the other proposition, which relates to the topic proposition either literally, figuratively, or contrastively, giving rise to the three kinds of comparative relation. There is often considerable elision in the surface structure.

17.1.5.1 The head-literal comparison relation

In literal comparisons the shared quality or characteristic is asserted to be literally true both of the topic and of the thing or event with which it is compared, but it is true in different degrees (more, less, equal) either on a scale provided by common experience, or on a more abstract and exact scale. Examples are:

“This book is just as interesting as the one he recommended”

Topic: this book

Compared with: the book he recommended

Shared quality: interest

Degree on scale: equal

“Her response was more enthusiastic than expected”

Topic: the way she responded

Compared event: the way she was expected to respond

Shared quality: enthusiasm

Degree on scale: topic higher

As can be seen in the second example, the compared element may be more complex than simply a single item or event. Her response is not compared with some other person’s response, but with something envisaged. Similarly, in “He was the most distinguished Hebraist of this generation” the shared quality is complex: knowledge of the Hebrew language.

The degree to which the shared quality is true of the things or events concerned belongs to the content rather than to the relation as such, hence is included within the underlying propositions, as in He knew most about the Hebrew language; other scholars knew less about the Hebrew language.

These examples, taken from English, use characteristic signals of comparative constructions, “more,” “most,” “than,” and “as.” But even in English, comparisons can be expressed in other ways. The analyst should be alert for such signals as “increase” and “decrease” as in “substantial increases have been seen in infections” (Shellfish 1), and also for the mention of different points in the same scale, which often realises a comparison without necessarily using an overt signal. In the Multiple Sclerosis text, the signal “more” occurs in 1, but the comparison (in fact a double comparison, of geographical location and time) continues throughout 3, 4, and 5, signalled only by numbers on the respective scales. In such cases, the comparison is not simply a presentational feature—it is what the whole message is about: both halves of the comparison are equally prominent.

Many languages have no comparative construction; they compare states or events by using such verbs as “exceed” or “increase.” In many African languages “He is tall he exceeds his brother” is the accepted way of expressing a comparison involving height.

17.1.5.2 The head-illustration relation

An illustration is a comparison that is not intended to be understood as literally true; it is figurative. The comparison is usually between things or events belonging to different referential areas: this makes the comparison vivid and arresting. The topic and its figurative counterpart (the image) are compared in respect of one quality only, which they share without any difference in degree. No other relationship is asserted or implied: if I call someone an old stager, I am referring only to experience and knowledge, not to any other characteristics of long-time actors.

The essential elements in an illustration are the topic, the image, and the shared characteristics. The application of the shared characteristic to the topic is often omitted in the surface structure, but it is an essential part of the meaning, so it is stated in full in the proposition containing the topic. Sometimes several related images are used, or one image is repeated throughout a configuration. In the following examples, the head-illustration relation is indicated by the word “like” in parentheses.

“He was gaping like a fish”

Topic: he

Image: fish

Shared characteristic: wide open mouth

Nonfigurative meaning: his mouth was wide open

Propositions: his mouth was wide open (like) a fish’s mouth

opens wide

“My rejection really rubbed salt into the wound”

Topic: my being rejected

Image: a wound with salt rubbed into it

Shared characteristics: existing pain, increased pain

Nonfigurative meaning: that I was rejected caused my

(emotional) pain to increase

Propositions: that I was rejected caused my (emotional) pain to

increase (like) rubbing salt in a wound causes (physical) pain

to increase

In idioms and fixed phrases it is not always possible to supply two underlying propositions, especially if the original meaning of the figure is lost or unfamiliar. “Keep in touch” simply means Continue to communicate with me, without any comparison or image being involved. Similarly, “money talks” means rich people have disproportionately great influence. To attempt further analysis is counter-productive, and indeed counter-intuitive: no comparison is intended.

Occasionally an image is from the same referential area as the topic, as in “She kept him at arm’s length.” There may be confusion here as to whether the reference is literal or figurative, though with such fixed phrases the figurative meaning comes first to mind: the context usually precludes doubt.

17.1.5.3 The head-contrast relation

Contrasts resemble comparisons in that two things, people, or situations are compared with respect to a quality or characteristic, the point of comparison. In a contrast, however, that characteristic is attributed to one of the compared elements, but denied of the other. An example is “Paul came from the upper echelons of society; Mildred quite clearly did not.” Here the elements being compared are Paul and Mildred; the point of comparison is high social status; this quality is attributed to Paul, but is denied of Mildred. The referential material common to both the underlying propositions (the point of comparison) appears in the surface structure only once, being expressed in the second clause by a pro-form.

The relation of contrast may be confused with other relations, since negation of a quality is not uncommon in presentational material and in speech: unless there is an underlying comparison, the relation concerned is not that of contrast. Thus, “She’s not bad looking, quite pretty really” does not involve a comparison, but realises a head-equivalent relation. “Not the red one—the blue one” realises a misunderstanding-correction relation.

Analysis is further complicated by the fact that the negation, although meant, may not appear overtly in the surface structure. An example is “Samantha is very bright, but her sister has real problems at school.” The underlying propositions are Samantha is intelligent; Samantha’s sister is not intelligent. In this example not intelligent is realised by a construction (“has real problems at school”) which does not contain a negative form: it expresses the same meaning in a different and mitigated way.

A further example is found in segments 8–10 of the Fountains text. Underlying the figurative language are the following propositions: In our towns there are very many unwanted things; in our towns there are not many fountains. The two elements being compared are unwanted things and fountains: the point of comparison is presence-in-abundance. This quality is asserted of unwanted things and denied of fountains, but there is no overt negative in the surface structure. The negative side of the contrast is carried by the rhetorical question, “Where are the fountains?”

As with comparisons, the two underlying propositions may be expressed by only one clause in the surface structure. In the London Wall text, the comment in segment 7 (“We have never been able to see the outer wall until now”) represents two propositions in contrast with each other: Until now we have not been able to see the outer wall; now we can see the outer wall. The two propositions share much referential content, which is realised only once in the surface structure. The analysis of this contrast is:

Compared elements: formerly; now

Point of comparison: visibility of the outer wall

Polarity: formerly negative; now positive

17.1.6 Relations based on abstract systems

We have the rational capacity not only to abstract a quality from some concrete event or situation and consider it independently (as in comparing the colours of two dresses or the size of two houses), but also to set up abstract systems of such qualities in order to make calculations and comparisons more exactly. Thus we set up mathematical systems and systems for measuring temperature, weight, refraction and so on. Less exactly, but at a similar degree of abstraction, we set up ethical, social, and political systems. These are universals, realised in concrete instances in daily life.

Universals can stand in many of the same relations as specifics: cause-effect, generic-specific, and so on. But care must be taken to look beyond the surface structure, as we can use everyday words in talking about abstractions, yet their meanings are more exact than in everyday usage. In “Add three to six,” the addition is a purely mental operation, whereas in “Add the sugar to the flour,” it is a physical one. “Three plus six equals nine” is not talking about two separate events, whereas “This result equals her previous best” is comparing two separate occasions. The difference is most notable with “if” constructions. “If x = 3 then y = 9” expresses not a contingent grounds-conclusion relation, but a necessary correlation in a system.

17.2 Monitoring relations

Whatever may be the message sender’s specific purpose in communicating a particular message, he always has one unchanging purpose, that of being understood. He is constantly monitoring his audience and orienting his message towards them in ways calculated to ensure their comprehension. This purpose gives rise to a set of relations quite different from the schema relations (chapter 12), which derive from the specific purposes of the communicator as he conveys a particular message and which provide a framework for its development. The relations deriving from the desire to be understood do not form part of the core material of the message, but rather relate supporting material to that core to assist the hearer in its comprehension.

In order to comprehend the message, the recipient needs to be able to locate it correctly in his array of stored conceptual frames and in the conceptual model of the message that he is constructing as it develops. Material included in the message for this purpose gives rise to relations that assist correct comprehension. It is also important that the message sender should, as far as possible, either correct or forestall misunderstandings: this also gives rise to a distinctive set of relations.

17.2.1 Relations that assist comprehension

All messages need to be located in the right conceptual frame. This is often provided by the situational context. In communications that are of a recurring nature, such as written instructions in an office or personal letters between friends, the situational context is well known, and little or no verbal context needs to be provided. But most written messages, especially printed ones destined for a wide audience, need to have some context-providing material presented initially in order to foreground the right conceptual area into which the recipient can integrate the message as he receives it. This frame-providing element can be long or short, according to the ease with which the hearer can retrieve the appropriate frame.

If the monitoring process indicates that the correct conceptual frame is absent and that the material is totally unfamiliar to the recipients, then considerable effort must be made to establish an adequate frame before the message proper commences. Some time ago, a friend of mine who taught physics in West Africa found that her competent secondary pupils were having unanticipated difficulty. She realised that many of the illustrations and examples in the textbook—the comprehension-assisting materials—were totally foreign to the experience of those pupils at that time: they were unfamiliar with electric irons, central heating units, and so on. She therefore wrote a new textbook, using as her illustrations objects familiar to the students—water pumps, bicycles, and radios. Many of the earlier difficulties then disappeared. The physics had not changed, but the context-providing support now drew on familiar rather than unknown frames.

When messages are long, fairly comprehensive introductory material may be needed: introduction, foreword, prelude, setting, or preliminary considerations. These have a context-establishing function.

When the content of the message is in a readily foregrounded conceptual area, the frame-establishing material can be brief. A simple “You know Phil, at church?” may be quite enough to forefront the appropriate individual. Notice that the question is not an information-seeking one—the hearer already knows Phil, and the speaker is assuming this. He is merely using a foregrounding-familiar-material formula. The underlying meaning is not Do you know Phil who attends our church?, but (I am about to commence a message about the familiar) Phil who attends our church. If the hearer had not known Phil, the frame-establishing part of the message could have been realised as, “There’s this friend of mine, Phil, at church. Well . . .” The formulaic “there” and the use of “this” both indicate that the statement presents new information and is context-providing. The message proper starts with the “Well . . .”

Two context-providing relations occur frequently in longer messages: these are setting-head and circumstance-head. In addition, orienting signals are provided to make clear to the addressee the way in which any given part of the message relates to what precedes and follows it (see 10.5.2). This gives rise to the signpost-head relation.

17.2.1.1 The setting-head relation

In general, the term “setting” has been used for the introductory configuration in a narrative unit, usually identifying the main participants in the major configuration which follows, and frequently giving locational and temporal information also. Often there are grammatical clues (tense, aspect, particles, etc.) that the setting is not thematic, but comprehension-assisting material. The setting configuration foregrounds a total scenario in the light of which the message that follows is to be understood.

A setting is held constant throughout the unit which follows, until a new setting either replaces the old one (“Meanwhile, back at home . . .”) or develops out of it (“The next morning . . .”). If the same setting is operative for a long time, or if it is reverted to after another has intervened, it becomes necessary to reactivate it: usually a few words are sufficient. Sometimes we assert explicitly that the setting has not changed: “they had not yet reached their destination when . . .,” “Mary was still sitting there, dazed, when . . .” etc. Such reaffirmed settings contain little or no new information. Many languages use complete or partial repetition with the same context-providing function. It is important to notice not only the signals of reactivation, but also the span throughout which an activated contextual frame remains operative before needing renewal.

Sometimes settings are so brief that they consist of less than a full proposition, as in Shellfish 1, “In Britain in the last decade.” This is a situation comparable to that of descriptions, which can be expressed as part of a clause (“uncooked shellfish”) or as a full clause (“shellfish which have not been cooked”). The relation (description or setting) is the same in either case, but the shorter version tends to carry much less prominence. Such overlap between relations within a proposition and relations between propositions is not common.

17.2.1.2 The circumstance-head relation

The relation of circumstance-head tends to be found within the body of a message, acting in effect as a very local setting, making clear the situation in which the head event took place. Such classification is often needed at configuration boundaries in order to steer the reader smoothly from one configuration to the next, especially if there is a time gap, a change of agent, or ellipsis.

A circumstance is not normally part of the eventline: if events occur in the circumstance they are usually backgrounded either lexically or grammatically. Often a circumstance consists of a summing up of the point reached in the message so far, a generic statement which rounds off what precedes, and at the same time provides a jumping-off point for what follows.

The Picnic text, analysed at the end of chapter 16, contains an example of the circumstance relation, “When all was ready” (17). This illustrates several points of interest. The circumstance contains an ellipsed event.(In segments 12 and 13 we are told that Mole unpacks the food and arranges it on the tablecloth: it is nowhere stated that he completed this task, but this is certainly implied in 17). The circumstance is reported as a state, not as a timeline event. If the writer had said, “When Mole had laid out the very last item,” then this would have been on the timeline (though less prominent than the main-clause events following). But the event is implicit in the state “was ready” and is off the timeline. The final unpacking event, which undoubtedly took place, is reduced to implicit, background status, and this deliberately, because the clause has a different function. The state of readiness constituting the circumstance is presented as a sort of summary: “all” covers the contents of the picnic basket comprehensively, and “was ready” covers the unpacking and arranging of the contents. The function of this circumstance clause is to keep the reader oriented to the developing state of the message at the point where one activity span ends and another begins, where there is a change of agent, and where there is also a schematic break.

It is assumed that setting and circumstance relations will be found to have a counterpart in theme-based texts, but more research will be needed before this can be adequately demonstrated.

17.2.1.3 The signpost-head relation

The signpost-head relation has already been discussed in section 11.4.2.3, in connection with intermittent prosodies. The message sender provides a “signpost” when he wishes to provide extra guidelines to assist the recipient in the correct understanding of the message. This material is prosodic: it stands outside the hierarchical structure of the message proper. But it must also be related in some way to the main body of the message at the appropriate point. It is this relation that we call the signpost-head relation. The signpost, which is usually short, indicates the function or significance of the head which may also be short, but which is more often a high-level unit. For example, “The message is clear” (Barefoot 20) and “the conclusion has to be that . . .” (Shellfish 6) both occur at important schematic boundaries, introducing the conclusion. Strictly speaking, however, any material is a signpost if it has the purpose of enabling the recipient to find his way through the message (i.e., to construct for himself a mental representation of the message as close as possible to that of the message sender). Thus numbering systems and headings are a kind of signpost also, as are abstracts and summaries in technical material.

17.2.2 Relations that correct or prevent misunderstanding

Message recipients cannot assimilate messages that seem to clash with their existing knowledge store or in some other way fail to cohere well with it. This gives rise to monitoring relations that correct misunderstandings or forestall them by explaining what is puzzling.

17.2.2.1 The misunderstanding-correction relation

It is normal for two elements to be present in corrections: the misunderstanding that is being repudiated and the corrected version that is replacing it. We call this relation (possible) misunderstanding-correction. A correction may take almost any form, according to the type of misunderstanding it is intended to correct:

“No, not that David. The one that works in the Highway Department.”

(correcting a wrong identification)

“No, I didn’t refuse to do it. I just said I didn’t fancy it much.”

(correcting a wrong interpretation)

“She said she was taking riding lessons, not writing lessons.”

(correcting a mishearing)

These examples are all from spoken messages. A sender of written messages also monitors for potential misunderstandings and presents the message accordingly. Since written messages are more carefully constructed than conversations, corrections of possible misunderstandings are rarely needed. Occasionally, however they do occur. Such corrections might have the form “Lest the reader think that our hero had forgotten his mission . . .” or “It would be wrong to deduce from this that . . .”

17.2.2.2 The head-explanation relation

Explanations, like corrections, characteristically occur in spoken messages, rather than written ones. They do occur in written materials, however, if the writer is communicating with readers who have a different cultural background or if the readers are known to be unfamiliar with the topic under consideration. An example of this is found in Radon 3, where “radon,” as a possibly unfamiliar term, is explained in terms of its properties. A good textbook will have many more explanations than a reference work or a purely theoretical presentation in the same topic area.

In spoken messages—or in written personal messages to a familiar recipient or group of recipients—explanations are given if the message sender realises that the recipients might be puzzled by what he is saying, even although they could superficially understand it. I may, for instance, write to my son and say, “There’s a new craft shop opened in Eynsham. I went there to speak at a meeting, and I parked right outside . . .” Now, the information “to speak at a meeting” is irrelevant to the main thrust of the message, which is obviously about the craft shop. The message would have been quite complete without any mention of why I happened to be in Eynsham. But my son knows that I hardly ever go to Eynsham, and if I had given no explanation, he might have gone down a mental sidetrack, thinking, “What on earth was she doing in Eynsham?” So, to leave him mentally uncluttered by unexplained loose ends, I block that sidetrack in the briefest possible way.

17.2.2.3 The head-restriction relation

A restriction is used to protect accuracy: this is the caveat relation. It is used when the surface-structure expression, although conveying the meaning intended by the message sender, might, if unqualified, be thought by the recipient to carry related meanings also, which in fact were not intended. The following are examples: “She was quite friendly towards them, whenever they met, which was not often” and “He played an enthusiastic part in village life, as far as his uncertain health permitted.”

In Shellfish 5–7 there is an example in which the restriction precedes the head: “until this pollution is controlled . . . ‘bivalve shellfish cannot be supplied with a guarantee . . . ’” It would have been somewhat misleading to state baldly that no guarantee could be supplied, as if that were the end of the matter: the no-guarantee situation would continue only until the pollution causing it was brought under control. Accuracy demanded that the restriction be expressed, in this instance at the beginning of the configuration, presumably because the writer wished to give the prominent final position to the continuing danger, rather than to a possible future removal of it.

17.3 Relations between a proposition and a concept

All the relations we have discussed so far hold between two or more propositions or configurations. We now come to a small group of relations that hold between a proposition and a concept: the proposition expands on a concept in another proposition, and relates directly to it; it does not relate to the host proposition (the one containing the concept) as a whole. In a sense, then, the proposition in this relation operates as an attributive to the concept: its function is comparable to that of an Attribute (to a Thing or to an Event) within a proposition (see 18.3.2.7).

17.3.1 The description relation

A descriptive proposition adds extra detail to a concept in the host proposition. It has already been pointed out (17.2.1.1) that “uncooked shellfish” (description within a clause) could also be expressed as “shellfish which have not been cooked” (description by a separate clause). But normally we do not use the longer mode of expression when a short one is available. The propositional description comes into its own when we want to express a quality for which we have no single adverb or adjective, or when we want to express a complex of attributions which together would overload the host proposition.

Where no suitable adjective exists, a proposition may replace it, as “We spent our holiday on a beautiful island which was covered with wild flowers.” There is in English no single word to express covered with wild flowers. If the island had been covered with trees, we could have said “a beautiful well-wooded island”—but we don’t say “well-flowered” in English, we use a full proposition instead.

An example from our texts is in Picnic 25–26: “he had been through a very great deal since that distant time which now seemed so many days ago.”

An example of a proposition expressing a complex description is found in London Wall 2. Here the archaeologists mentioned in segment 1 are described in terms of a recent event of which they were the agents—”who discovered part of the outer wall for the first time.”

In such a relation the concept concerned may be expressed in the surface structure in any position in the host clause, and the describing proposition may take different surface-structure forms or positions accordingly. This is not a problem at the propositional level, since concepts can be repeated as often as required. Thus in Barefoot 8 and 9, the original text reads “The Itaipu Dam cost the Brazilians (national debt $110 billion) $25 billion.” This is a shorthand for “. . . the Brazilians who had a national debt . . .” Since the description represents a clause within the host clause, the two have to be put on separate lines in the segmented form: dots in the host clause indicate the original position of the description. No such problem arises in the propositional display, which would simply read:

The Itaipu Dam cost the Brazilians $25 billion

The Brazilians had a national debt of $110 billion

17.3.2 The identification relation

Much of what has been said about descriptions also applies to identifications, for these are simply unique descriptions, descriptions which enable the hearer to identify the concept concerned uniquely, in contrast with any other concept with which it might be confused.

Identifications usually relate to Thing concepts (see section 18.2.1), as in, “The members of Parliament who lost their seats at the election.” Here there is an implicit contrast with other members of Parliament who did not lose their seats, and the description is sufficient to identify uniquely (without borderline cases) the politicians concerned.

Identifications have one characteristic which is not shared by descriptions: the identification coalesces, as it were, with the concept, forming one complex concept. If my friend says, “The lady who teaches my son piano has some vacancies,” then she is thinking of one piano-teaching lady only; if the identification were removed the remaining host proposition would be defective. Descriptions can be removed (as they often are in summaries) without damage to the host proposition, but even in summaries identifications cannot be removed.

17.3.3 The specification relation

The specification relation is very similar to the identification relation: it forms one complex concept with the concept which it specifies. The difference is that specifications relate to an Event (section 18.2.2) or Attribute (section 18.2.3) rather than a Thing. Examples of this are in Daffodil Leaves 3 and 9. “After the last flower has died” relates to the Attribute concept six weeks; “as soon as they die” relates to the Event concept remove.

17.4 The authorial comment-head relation

The authorial comment-head relation is neither associative nor monitoring. When the message sender steps into the message in order to express his own opinion about part of the content, then this comment effectively stands outside the message proper and takes no part in its network of relations. It is included here because it does bear some relation to the message (it is a comment on message content); it is not an aside, which consists of a totally different message that interrupts the main one. (If I am on the phone, and interrupt my conversation briefly to ask my daughter to answer the doorbell, that is a true aside—the two messages are different in content and, in this example, in intended recipient also.)

An example of an authorial comment is Picnic 22 (already discussed, in section 16.6.5). The comment “as people will do” appears to be a comparison (Mole started spring-cleaning early like other people start spring-cleaning early), but this analysis fails to catch the writer’s purpose at this point. He is really saying, Isn’t it odd that people always start spring-cleaning early? He is thus making an evaluative comment on part of the message content.

Note the following points:

(1) This comment could be removed without any disruption whatever to the relational structure of the message: it relates to the message content but not to its structure.

(2) There is no overt mention of “I.” The comment is taken as emanating from the author because it is evaluative; an evaluation not credited to any other source is almost always authorial.

(3) It is inserted in an inherently third-person message. There is little point in talking about authorial comments in any other kind of message: expressive messages (like Fountains) or volitional messages (like Badger) already express a first-person outlook.

17.5 A worked example: Daffodil Leaves 2–12

At the end of the chapter 16 we analysed a time-based text. We now look at a portion of the Daffodil Leaves text, an example that illustrates a different kind of relational network.

17.5.1 The relational display and conventions

2 Leaves should be left for six weeks

3 after the last flower has died

4 before cutting back.

5 This period is essential

6 to rebuild foodstores in the bulb

7 so that it can grow and flower.

8 You should remove flowerheads

9 as soon as they die

10 so that energy is not diverted

11 into seed production

12 but leave the flower stalk.

The number of vertical layerings in a display reflects the complexity of the text. The more complex the text, the more vertical connections will appear in the diagram. It is important, however, not to have the major structural outline of the text obscured by a large amount of supporting material. For this reason, the vertical layerings are carefully lined up with each other according to their significance within the text: head3, for example, is aligned with head1 and head2 on the basis of its relational significance, rather than with segments 10–11 or 8–11, which would have obscured its higher-level significance. In other words, the layering level of any configuration is determined by its significance within the total configuration rather than by its size and position.

This system of labelling makes it possible for a segment to carry multiple labels without confusion. Thus segment 10 can readily be seen to function simultaneously as the reason for 11, and as the purpose of segments 8–9. But multiple functions are not in themselves an indication of structural importance: structurally important segments, as we saw in 16.6.4, are those reached directly from the extreme left of the diagram by a horizontal line, without diverting vertically. Thus segment 12 is structurally more important than segment 10, although the latter has more relational labels.

Reading the chart from left to right, then, we see that the configuration has three head segments: only segments 2, 8, and 12 are reached directly by a line starting at the extreme left of the page. We can also readily see that the line to segment 2 is broken up by labels of three sub-units, and the line to segment 8 by labels of two sub-units, while the line to segment 12 is unbroken. This indicates that segment 2 is the head of a complex substructure, and segment 8 the head of a less complex substructure, while segment 12 has no expanding substructure at all.

Daffodil Leaves is a volitional text, in which the three heads are all directives. In a high-level schema analysis, they would be labelled dir, but because we want to emphasise their referential relationships at the lower level and their prominence with respect to the supporting configurations, we have used the head label.

17.5.2 Comments on the relational analysis

As can be seen in the display, the three heads on the left are in an additive relation to each other. That is, they all stand in the same relationship to the rest of the message (all are directives) and none is relationally subordinate to the others (as would be the case if, for example, the carrying out of one command was essential before the other two could be tackled).

At first glance head2 and head3 seem to be in a contrastive relationship with each other (“Remove flowerheads . . . but leave the flower stalk”), but this is not the best analysis here. A contrastive surface structure, when relating to commands, often realises quite different underlying functions from similar surface-structure features in informational and expressive imports. In the latter the function of a contrast is to highlight the contrasted statement and throw it into sharper relief; it is based on a comparison. But in this instance there is no real comparison. There are simply the two instructions, one about something to be removed, the other about something not to be removed: the two are not compared—simply treated differently. Not only is there no comparison but proposition 12 does not serve to highlight 8 in any way. Hence, configuration 8–11 and proposition 12 are analysed as being conjoined in the relation of addition. The subscripts (2 and 3) are a convention for signalling addition.

At a lower level, segments 2 and 4 are in an additive relation to each other, the underlying meaning being directive in both cases (Do nothing to the leaves for six weeks after the last flower has died; then cut them back). The only referential relation between them is that of time, and simple succession does not make either element relationally subordinate.

Segments 3 and 9 are each an example of a specification relation (section 17.3.3). In both cases, the specifications are an integral part of one of the concepts in the head segment. Leaves are to be left for not just any six weeks, but for six-weeks-after-the-last-flower-has-died. The command to remove flower heads is of no use to the questioner as it stands: what he needs to know is remove-as-soon-as-they-die. In both instances, the specification is somewhat analogous to the proposition that identifies a concept and forms an integral part of it—the-man-who-lives-next-door as contrasted with any other man. But in the case of the specification relation, it is not a Thing concept which is being so delimited, but an Attribute (“six weeks” in 2), or an Event (“remove” in 8).

Segments 6 and 7 relate to each other as reason-result, as do segments 10 and 11 also. They are somewhat confusing to analyse, because in each case they are dominated by a means-purpose relation: the gardener is being told to do something (5; 8–9) with a certain purpose (6–7; 10–11); the sense of purposiveness colours these low-level configurations throughout. But considering 6–7 and 10–11 simply as segment pairs, there is no purposiveness involved: the relation is a purely causal one in the natural world.

17.5.3 Comments on prominence

Some of the relations in this text (head-specification and head-explanation) need no comment with respect to their prominence. But the other relations allow for some debate and are of interest because the prominence traces back to different sources, which will be discussed.

In segments 2, 8 and 12 the relative prominence derives from topicality. Successive heads in a message are frequently analysed as of equal prominence, but here the first head is considered more prominent than the other two because it alone provides a direct answer to the gardener’s question. He had clearly established the topic as cutting leaves, and in moving on to the commands in relation to flowerheads and flower stalks the writer is establishing associated subtopics, diverging temporarily from the main one.

In segments 2 and 4 prominence derives from information status. These segments give two commands, in additive relation to each other, the first being more prominent than the second. Segment 2 (Do nothing to the leaves for six weeks) is the more prominent for two reasons: it answers the question in segment 1 “How soon . . . ?” (see above), and it consists of new information. Segment 4, which realises the proposition and then cut the leaves back, contains only the same concepts as are in the original question (cut and leaves) and in the answer in 2 (the time factor). The time factor is, of course, prominent, since it is the information which the questioner had specifically requested. But this is a second and very oblique reference to it, appropriately expressed in a dependent clause with a nonfinite verb. Information does not have much prominence when it is no longer new.

In the means-purpose pairing of segments 5 and 6–7, prominence derives from the schema. The same is true of 8–9 and 10–11. This is a volitional text: the enquiring gardener has asked what to do, and the answering expert tells him. Hence the commands are more important than the supporting structures that are motivational. Here 5 is in effect a recapitulation of the command in 2–3, and 8–9 is overtly a command. These segments are therefore more prominent than those which provide motivation (6–7; 10–11).

At a lower level, a similar argument determines the relative prominence of the reason-result pairs in 6–7 and 10–11. In time-based texts, which have underlying temporal structures such as stimulus-response, a result tends to be more prominent than a reason: people are more interested in what happened than in why. But this is not a time-based text, it is a volitional one. The main events are already known, and we are at this level analysing the motivational configurations in the message: where motives are concerned, reasons are prominent. The reason for removing flowerheads (i.e., motivating their removal) is to prevent the diversion of energy; the exact direction of the diversion is of secondary concern. Similarly the reason for having a six-week delay is to enable the bulb to rebuild its foodstores; the use to which those foodstores will later be put is not a matter of great importance.

18

THE PROPOSITION

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18.3.2.4 Complex Things

18.3.2.5 A borderline case: Attribute or Event?

18.3.2.6 Attributive propositions and import

18.3.2.7 Presentational functions of Attributes: description and identification

We have now reached the smallest unit of communication, the proposition. In this chapter we will be considering its internal make-up, and in chapter 19 we will consider the problems involved and the conventions employed when deriving the underlying propositions from a text.

18.1 The nature of the proposition

18.1.1 The proposition as a unit of meaning

The proposition as a unit of meaning has already been discussed in section 10.2.4 and that discussion will be assumed throughout. Here we will simply refresh our memories concerning the main points which we need to bear in mind.

First, propositions are meaning units, not grammatical or lexical ones.

Second, propositions consist of significant groupings of concepts at a pre-verbal level.

Third, propositions represent conceptual patternings in the mind of the message sender, who expresses his meaning in words in order to construct corresponding conceptual patterns in the mind of the addressee. But a proposition represents the speaker’s intended meaning, not the addressee’s understanding of that meaning. Interpretations may vary, but the speaker means one thing only.

18.1.2 The proposition as a unit of communication

The proposition is the smallest unit of communication, but that does not mean that it is the smallest unit with which we are concerned. Obviously we are concerned also with the parts that make up propositions—things, events, and attributes. But these only refer, they do not communicate. The expressions “soup,” “taking examinations,” and “getting married” refer, via the concepts they signal, to things and to situations, but they do not communicate anything. It is only when such referential elements are combined appropriately with a specific communicative significance that they constitute a proposition and convey a message to the hearer.

Single concepts must be distinguished from one-word utterances. If someone comes into the kitchen and asks, “What are you making?” and I reply, “Soup,” what I actually mean is, I am-making soup. My one-word reply was simply a verbal shorthand. It signalled a whole proposition. It did not only refer; it communicated.

Let us consider the analogy of an atom, which is the smallest unit of a physical substance. An unimaginably small bit of gold, a single atom of it, is the smallest bit of gold possible. Divide it further, and it stops being gold. Now, we know that that atom of gold has component parts: scientists will tell us exactly how many neutrons and electrons and even smaller elements it contains. But these neutrons are not gold-like: they are no different from the neutrons in feathers or water. At this point we have passed below a theoretical and actual threshold of real gold-ness. There is a sense in which the proposition is like the atom; it is the smallest unit with a particular quality, namely, communicativeness. While it is quite possible to cut the proposition into recognisable bits, these bits do not communicate. When we probe lower than the proposition, we have passed below the threshold of communication, and the bits are just bits, such as might appear in any proposition. Concepts are the neutrons and electrons of communication, propositions the atoms.

That the proposition is the smallest unit of communication is necessarily so, because of the nature of thought. All thinking, and hence all communicating, involves motion, mental motion. We do not think simply by having concepts: we think by relating them. The proposition is the smallest unit in which concepts relate to each other.

18.1.3 The reference and significance of a proposition

A proposition has reference by virtue of its constituent concepts. The proposition underlying “She will arrive in time” contains the concepts of a female person, the event of arriving somewhere, and the quality of that event as occurring at the appropriate moment. These constitute the referential material of the proposition, along with the futurity of the event, which is equally being referred to, though in a somewhat different way. But the same concepts underlie “Will she arrive in time?” and “She must arrive in time.” The reference is the same—it is the significance (import or presentational function) that is different.

Thus, like all units of communication, a proposition is defined by its reference and its significance. A more formal transcription of a proposition would separate these somewhat, as follows:

arrive, she, in-time (fut) [I-P] is expressed as, “She will arrive in time.”

arrive, she, in-time (fut) [I-R] is expressed as, “Will she arrive in time?”

Here I-P and I-R stand for “information-providing” and “information-requesting”; they appear in square brackets following the referential elements and indicate the significance of the proposition.

In practice, this would not be easy to read. It would also be repetitious: sometimes almost all the propositions in a discourse are information providing. In the next chapter we are going to opt for a simpler approach. But it is worth noting the more formal possibility, for it makes clear the essential point that without both reference and significance, there is no proposition. This too is in keeping with the nature of our thought processes, for in all normal situations we do not simply hold concepts in our mind, we hold them in our mind as having a certain value—as being believed or hoped, true or false, actual or possible. We can, for theoretical purposes, detach reference and significance from each other, but it takes considerable mental effort.

All propositions also have presentational value: the referential elements are presented to the hearer as familiar or unknown, welcome or unwelcome, and so on. But these hearer-related values would vary with a change in audience in a way that the reference and purposive significance would not. Hence reference and purposive significance are considered as the defining parameters of the proposition.

18.1.4 The hierarchical structuring of propositions

No proposition occurs entirely on its own. Each is part of a hierarchy and contributes something to the communicative unit of which it is part. From this fact, two important observations follow.

First, even those propositions which seem to occur in isolation do not in fact do so. In connected discourse it is obvious that propositions do not stand alone. But even a single, short utterance in a conversation cannot stand without its context and mean the same. It assumes much of the rest of the conversation. Thus if I say, “She arrives tomorrow,” I mean a certain person and a certain day. I also mean that she will be arriving in a particular place, not just anywhere: as I speak, I have a concept of that place. All these factors derive from the context—either from the situational context or from the previous utterances in the conversation or both. The nearest we ever get to an isolated proposition is perhaps in public notices, such as “Keep off the grass,” or in situations of danger where only the most urgent information is verbalised, as in “Fire!” or “Help! Help!” But even these, although they occur apart from any surrounding verbal contexts, nevertheless occur in very specific situational contexts and are understood in the light of those contexts. (“Fire!” can mean either There is danger due to an unintended fire having started or I am commanding you to shoot, depending on the situation. The meaning is, as always, situation related.)

Second, some elements that seem to belong to the proposition are better handled at higher levels, as prosodies. If I am expressing disagreement with something a friend has said in casual conversation, I will say, “Oh, do you really think so?” If I am in a formal situation I will say, “I disagree entirely.” The underlying proposition in both cases is the same. The difference between the formal wording and the informal must be accounted for. But this is better done at the level of the whole discourse. Otherwise, formality or informality would need to be attributed to every proposition throughout.

Similarly, there is a great difference in exactness between describing a flower as a beautiful object and describing it as a botanical object. The degree of objective accuracy expressed is better attributed to the whole discourse than to any one part of it.

Sometimes a time or location is mentioned which attaches equally to all the propositions in a paragraph configuration, though only mentioned in one initial clause. Such cases are best handled at paragraph level.

18.2 The referential elements in a proposition

A proposition represents the meaning which the speaker or writer intends to convey. This meaning is conceptualised in his mind as he communicates: the concepts that constitute his thought patterns are dynamic, merging into each other, entering into complex relations, but always referring outwardly.

We are presented with the problem of trying to encapsulate such vibrant and fleeting concepts in a form that can be handled analytically. It seems best, since they relate outwardly, to classify man’s concepts in terms of the world to which they refer and in terms of man’s experiences of that world. If we bear in mind that any such attempt is bound to be clumsy, and if we are not deluded into thinking that concepts are as clear-cut and determinate as our descriptions of them, then this approach will serve us very well.

We come, then, to what we earlier called the neutrons and electrons of reference, the constituent parts of propositions. We have already mentioned these in passing; in section 18.1.2 we spoke of things, events, and attributes as parts of propositions. We were not at that point speaking at a theoretical level, but simply using the most understandable terms available to describe the patterning of concepts in propositions. We must now consider this more carefully. How many kinds of concepts operate in propositions? How many concept classes make up their patterning?

In one sense, there is no limit to the number of concept classes one could establish. It would not be hard to find languages where it was useful to distinguish person concepts, place concepts, inanimate-object concepts, and natural-phenomena concepts. One could also distinguish between events affecting a person or object, events not affecting any other party, causative events, iterative (repeated) events, and so on. But this would lead to a vast and confusing variety of propositional patterns.

Human beings, all over the world and in all cultures, view the world as consisting of people and things with a variety of happenings constantly shaping and reshaping their relationships. We can be even more general than that and view people, other animate beings, and inanimate objects as all one general class of entities. The world then consists of entities, events, and relationships as an irreducible minimum.

But this is inadequate for an analysis of the way we talk. When we say, “These oranges are sour” or “The road is four metres wide,” we are certainly talking of entities (i.e., oranges and roads), but the sourness of the oranges and the width of the road are neither happenings nor relationships: they are qualities or characteristics that attach in some way (i.e., with some relationship) to the oranges and the road. This is a property of the way our minds work: other things as well as oranges can be sour; other things as well as roads can be four metres wide. We can think of sourness and width independently of the entities they characterise. We thus need to add a fourth general class of concept to our list, that of attribute, or quality.

We have now divided the concepts with which man thinks into four referential classes or categories. Obviously they are very broad categories, capable of being subdivided again and again. Nevertheless we are claiming that man’s thinking works this way, and that all the meaning he communicates in speech can be analysed in terms of propositions made up of concepts of these four categories. We will now consider each concept class in turn: Entities or Things, Events, Attributes, and Relations. We will use capital letters when referring to concept classes so as to distinguish them from references to real-world entities, events, and so on.

18.2.1 Things

There is no problem in classifying humans, animals, and material objects as “Things” or “Entities.” (We will initially use these terms interchangeably.) Since we are dealing with man’s concepts of things, rather than their real-world counterparts, it is also possible to include as “Things” entities of debated ontological status, such as ghosts, angels, ancestral spirits, and so on. We can even add imagined entities, such as Brer Rabbit, Tom Sawyer, extraterrestrials, and goblins.

But our world is much more complex than this, or certainly we conceptualise it as more complex. If several Things get together and form themselves into a judo club, for instance, is the judo club also a Thing, an Entity? We might agree to define it as such, on the grounds that it has definable members, a definable location, and persists through time. But criteria of this kind soon fail us.

Is a trade union an Entity? Is a driving test an Entity, or is it more complex than that? How about a riot, or share prices, or the crime rate, or a camping holiday? In English we use nouns to express many concepts which we would hesitate to call Entities, due to their complexity, or their level of abstraction. Usually these are highly complex concepts of people acting according to a socially established pattern, even though they are referred to with a one-word label. In general, any frequently repeated purposive activity is conceptualised as a unity: the question is, what kind of concept is it?

There are several possible solutions to this problem, each of which may be applicable in different circumstances. For instance, if the text being analysed is in one’s own language, so that one has a mother-tongue speaker’s knowledge of all that is covered conceptually by the single word or phrase, then it is possible to set up a further conceptual category, P, standing for patterning, whether of a social nature or some other nature. The concept P may then be represented in the proposition by the appropriate word or phrase, such as “election” or “driving test.” This is particularly useful if the main focus of the analysis is at higher levels, such as paragraph or episode, and the complex nature of the patterning concept is therefore not in focus.

An alternative solution is to consider that such complex concepts sometimes operate like Things and sometimes like Events. Thus in “The demonstration lasted until 3.00 a.m.,” we may consider that “demonstration” represents a durative Event and propositionalise it as The people continued-demonstrating until 3.00 a.m. But in “The demonstration was the biggest ever seen in the capital,” it enters into a comparative construction, just as a Thing would. Therefore it is better to handle it as a Thing in this proposition. This would give us The demonstration was big (more than) all previous demonstrations in the capital were big.

Sometimes, of course, such constructions are combined, as in “The demonstration, the biggest ever seen in the capital, lasted until 3.00 a.m.” and “The demonstration, which lasted until 3.00 a.m., was the biggest ever seen in the capital.” In such instances the prominence patterns provided by main and subordinate clauses must be preserved in the propositions. The first example, in which “demonstration” realises an Event, would be propositionalised as follows (omitting “in the capital (city),” which is taken as a referential prosody of location, and indicated by an asterisk):

The people continued demonstrating\* until 3:00

a.m.

More people were demonstrating\*

than people had ever demonstrated\* before.

The second example, in which “demonstration” is considered as a Thing, would be analysed as follows:

The demonstration\* was big

more than all previous demonstrations\* were big

It (demonstration)\* lasted until 3:00 a.m.

If the text is not in one’s own language, or if it is being analysed preliminary to translation into a language of very different social and informational patternings than one’s own, then it may be necessary to “unpack” the complexities and use several propositions to convey the meaning. For example, the concept signalled by “wedding” may be difficult to express in a culture in which there is no single, central marriage ceremony or in a language with a preference for verbs in its information patterns. Instead of “The wedding will take place on Saturday,” one may end up with something like “John will marry Jane on Saturday. Their families will assemble so that they will celebrate.” Thus the complex concept is handled not as a Thing, Event, or Patterning, but as a propositional configuration. Another example is “share prices,” which might be spelt out as “How much money people pay so that they may own part of a business/company.” “Demonstration,” unpacked in the same way, realises the propositions People gather/march publicly to show that they are angry.

A concept can be so complex that we have no single word for it; nevertheless, it can be considered an Entity if the thought patterns into which it enters are typical of Entities. We may say, for instance, “All the people he had ever wronged came before his mind,” and we are classing all those wronged people as one collective Entity, parallel with “Lucilla” in “Lucilla came before his mind.” Concepts can be very complex: they can be split up into many component concepts. What determines their unitary status on any given occasion is the way they function within a proposition.

18.2.2 Events

18.2.2.1 Actions, experiences, and processes

Some concepts are classified as Events without any difficulty. If someone hands a book to a friend, or leaps across a stream, or puts on an overcoat, we have no hesitation in labelling the giving, the leaping, and the putting on as Events. Events involve change, change in Things or in the relations between Things: there is no doubt that such change is involved in these instances.

The events just mentioned are all actions, willed by the doer and taking place at a specifiable moment in time. Other events are more problematical. How about unwilled events, as in “She heard a sudden shout” or “He felt the wind on his face”? These are Events also, but the relationship of the people involved is different: in the previous events they were the agents of events; here they are the experiencers of events. Change is certainly involved, but the relationships are different; the Entity concerned did not bring about the change. Any causality involved emanated from some other Entity, not the experiencer.

By a slight extension, we can consider this experiencing category to cover involuntary events also, such as “He sneezed” or “She tripped.” One experiences, rather than wills, a sneeze or a stumble.

A different problem arises when something happens to an inanimate Entity. If we say, “The milk turned sour,” or “The bomb exploded,” we would certainly want to classify these as Events, but they were neither willed nor experienced by the Entity. Propositions of this sort involve a further kind of Event—a process. In processes the Entity concerned is the undergoer of the Event, during which the Entity changes in some significant way with respect to its qualities and characteristics: the Entity after the Event is different from the same Entity before the Event took place.

Obviously, these three classes of Events are very broad; they could readily be subdivided further. For instance, it might be useful on occasion to distinguish cognitive experiences from emotional experiences, and so on. But for our present purposes the three broad classes are sufficient. They may be summarised as follows:

Action Event The central participant wills the event as its

agent, causing some change.

Experience Event The central participant experiences the event,

either sensorily or emotionally, but does not will

the event—the cause of the experience is external

to the experiencer, who is not changed as to

physical state.

Process Event The central participant is changed with respect to

its physical state in the course of undergoing the

event. The cause of the process is external to the

undergoer.

18.2.2.2 Time span and frequency of Events

In the preceding section, Events were classified according to the relationship of the central participant to the event itself. This classification is independent of the time involved and can be made regardless of whether the action took place quickly or over a span of time. However, it is sometimes useful to categorise Events in terms of their time span and frequency.

Some cases are fairly straightforward to analyse. It is obvious that “She woke up” is a short-span (punctiliar) Event and “She stayed awake all night” is a long-span (durative) Event. The analysis is not determined by taking out a stop watch and timing the event. It is rather a matter of whether the real-life event is conceptualised as happening at a point in time (punctiliar) or throughout a time (durative).

Another kind of conceptual Event is one in which numerous events are thought of as one. If the events resemble each other closely and are performed by the same agent or participant for the same purpose, then what may in real life be numerous separate events can be talked of as if they were one. “She kept on ringing the doorbell” is an example. Here we do not mean that her finger was continuously on the doorbell for an extended period, but that she rang repeatedly and without major interruption. We are not talking about a single durative event, but about an iterative event, that is, about the “same” event being repeated several times, with such unity of referential characteristics and of purpose that they coalesce in the mind, and hence in speech, as one composite Event.

Closely related to durative and iterative events are habitual events. If I say, “She taught in that school for forty years,” I do not mean that she taught continuously, never moving from the classroom: the teaching was not durative. Nor do I mean that she taught repeatedly in the school: the teaching was not iterative. Rather, the teaching is viewed as habitual: it happened over a period of time, not occupying the forty years continuously and not necessarily without intermission.

To summarise then, there are four time-related types of Events:

Punctiliar Event The event occupies a time span viewed as short.

Durative Event The event occupies, continuously, a time span

viewed as long.

Iterative Event The event consists of several events perceived as

essentially identical and repeated at intervals.

Habitual Event The event occupies, with intermissions, a time

span viewed as long.

18.2.2.3 How Agent relates to the Event

We talk not only about events which have actually occurred: we evaluate and comment on possible events as well. Thus we say of a baby, “He can crawl now,” or “He wants to go to sleep,” or “He’s trying to walk.” Now, although “can” and “want” and “try” are all verbs, there is no separate, isolable Event can or try or want. Rather, these are aspects or perceptions or evaluations of events. One can try lots of different events or be able to do them or want to do them. In other words, the relation of the central participant to the event is not always the straightforward one of simply carrying it out: a person can relate to an event in a variety of ways including trying, failing, being able, or being morally obliged to do it. These relations with the event are not viewed as a separate Event, but as modifications to the main Event.

Starting and finishing an activity are closely related to this. The starting is not an Event in itself, but it is an aspect of an Event, as is its completion. They are significant punctiliar points relating to a durative Event. “He started to whistle” marks the initial moment of an activity which persisted through a period of time. “She stopped talking” marks the final moment of a similarly persistent activity.

18.2.2.4 Causal Events

Sometimes we talk not only of an event, but of its cause—in the same breath, as it were. I may say, “Peter’s teacher really upset me today,” and I mean that Peter’s teacher caused me to feel or react in a certain way. But how many Events are involved here, one or two? Surely the teacher’s doing something and my being in a certain state as a result are two different events. Yet I reported them quite naturally as if they were one—one punctiliar action Event, in fact. We do not even know exactly what the teacher did to upset me: the punctiliar action involved is given no content at all.

This combination of an unspecified action causing a specified result is not at all uncommon. Sometimes the causal action is not mentioned specifically because any listener would know what it was, as in “The rain spoilt the picnic.” It was the events of the rain falling and wetting the participants that resulted in the spoilt picnic, but there was no need to spell this out in detail.

Sometimes the causal action is unspecified because it is not relevant to the matter in hand, whereas the result is. Examples of this are “She lengthened her dress” (= She did-X—result—her dress became longer) and “They disrupted the match” (= Certain-people did-X—result—they interrupted the match and they spoilt it).

Communications involving causality have aroused immense interest partly because, considered objectively, all events are caused by a whole series of preceding events, and partly because the different preceding events make different contributions to the final result. For example, in “I dropped the milk bottle and it broke,” my dropping the milk bottle is essentially the sole cause of its breaking. But if I say, “I had an increase in salary, so I bought a boat,” there is no such necessary connection between the two: lots of people get increases in salary without buying boats. Other factors must have been involved. I must already have been wanting a boat, and my lack of money must have been the only thing stopping me. The money I received did not in itself cause me to buy the boat; it simply removed the last obstacle to my doing so.

These and other causal relations have been much studied elsewhere. Here our concern is, are causal happenings single Events or are there always at least two Events involved? Once more we must distinguish between the real-world situation, and the way man thinks about that situation. In the world as we experience it, causality is all-pervasive. Every happening and state of affairs has many causes, some grounded in the nature of things, some remote from the happening, others closely related to it. But because causality is so deeply rooted in our experience we normally take it for granted. In our thinking and in our speech, we assume that things are caused, and we also frequently assume what caused these things to be so. Thus a happening that is very complex can be thought of and reported as unitary.

As a rule of thumb, it seems best to assume that if the cause of a happening is unspecified (as in “She upset me”) then the cause and the result are being conceptualised as a unity, and consequently only one proposition is involved. But if the cause and the result are both specified (as in “Her abrasive manner upset me”), then two propositions are involved (She spoke/acted harshly—result—I became upset). Even when only one proposition is involved, however, the causality present in it means that it cannot be analysed simplistically as action, experience, or process. Rather, causal propositions should be considered as a separate class, complex in nature, consisting of cause + action, or cause + experience, or cause + process, as in the following examples:

Cause + Action “The doctor made me flex my arm.”

Cause + Experience “The cold water made her regain

consciousness.”

Cause + Process “She tore her dress.”

These examples realise the following propositions: The doctor caused I flexed my arm, The cold water caused she became conscious again, and (Something unspecified) caused her dress became torn. Note that, since the immediate cause of the tearing of the dress was presumably a thorn or nail, etc., and since the owner did not deliberately cause the tear, the agent of tear is not she. The surface-structure sentence does not mean that she deliberately tore her dress, but that she unwittingly allowed something else to do so, something unspecified. An alternative underlying meaning is She unwittingly allowed her dress became torn. Both versions diminish the role of agent and focus on the resultant state of the dress.

18.2.2.5 Negated Events

Not all surface-structure negations realise genuine negated Events in propositions. This is true of many figures of speech, for example, “She’s not dim by any means” (= She is quite intelligent) or “His eyes never left her face” (= He kept-on-looking-steadily-at her face). “Not many people like tripe” really means Very few people like (to eat) tripe.

Genuine negated Events are events which were planned, willed, or intended, but were not carried out, as in “She did not get to the station in time” or “He did not go after all.”

Sometimes a possible action is envisaged and then decided against, as in “We avoided the M25 when we visited her yesterday.” On the face of it, why single out the M25 for special mention? There must have been many other British roads which we did not use either, including some which might have been possible routes. But obviously we had consciously considered travelling on the M25, and consciously decided not to do so. The negative inherent in “avoid” is used to negate something envisaged which did not eventuate.

Sometimes an Event is negated because the message sender thinks that the recipient may be mistakenly expecting it, whereas it never in fact transpired. This kind of negation arises from the monitoring process. Examples are “He knew where it was, but he didn’t tell her” and “It must have hurt, but she didn’t cry.”

Other genuine negations are of relations rather than Events, as in “The man who called today is not the one who called last time” (negated identification) and “She spoke to him very gently, not as her sister would have done” (negated comparison).

18.2.3 Attributes

18.2.3.1 Different kinds of Attribute

Our concepts of attributes do not arise directly from our experience, but from our analysis of that experience. We say, “a square carpet,” “three tickets,” or “a superb sunset,” yet we have never had any direct experience of squareness or three-ness or superb-ness. We have, however, experienced square somethings, three somethings, or superb somethings, and we have done so repeatedly. Out of these experiences we abstract the qualities they have in common until we can think of them independently.

There are many different kinds of Attribute: sensory Attributes (“The vase is smooth”), evaluative Attributes (“The vase is beautiful”), analytical Attributes (“The vase is eight inches tall”), classifying Attributes (“The vase is Ming dynasty”). Some of these Attributes seem more closely related to the Thing than others. Physical attributes like smoothness seem to attach to the vase more closely than abstract ones like eight-inch-ness, and both seem closer than Ming-dynasty-ness. But such Attributes derive from experiences of many vases and many textures and sizes and other qualities—and then from comparing and categorising the elements in those experiences.

Attributes relate also to Events. If we say “She walked home slowly,” we are attributing to the Event of walking a quality of slowness, derived from a comparison of walking events with respect to their speed. (It should be noted that surface-structure adverbs, which normally relate to Events, do not always do so at the level of meaning. If we say “She walked home excitedly,” the Attribute excited belongs more to she than to walked, more to the person than to the gait.)

All the Attributes considered so far provide descriptive detail: they single out for mention a characteristic or quality of a complex concept, whether Thing or Event. Not all Attributes are descriptive, however. Numbers and quantities constitute Attributes of a somewhat different kind, at a more abstract level. They are often (though not invariably) used to delimit rather than to describe a Thing, as in “Three quarters of the people went away” or “Two tablets to be taken night and morning.” This kind of Attribute also arises from our comparing and categorising capacities. There may not be very much in common between a bar of chocolate and an empty swing in a park, but if there are exactly three of each, and four children are on the picnic, then the threeness in each case will be noted (and compared unfavourably with fourness) even by the mathematically unsophisticated.

In practice we have little difficulty in identifying Attributes, but there are some problem areas in analysis that will be discussed in the following sections.

18.2.3.2 The borderline between Attributes and Events

It is sometimes difficult to decide whether a certain concept is an Attribute or an Event. If we say “Jane is happy,” we are attributing happiness to Jane—”happy” expresses an Attribute, not an Event. But in “Jane has always been a campaigner for animal rights,” does “campaigner” attribute some quality or class membership to Jane? Or is it a covert Event (Jane habitually campaigns)? Similarly, in “The sea is very choppy,” does “choppy” express an Attribute or a durative process Event?

The question only seems perplexing because it ignores the nature of our conceptualising processes. It is precisely the occurrence of durative or habitual Events that enables us to abstract some recurring or constant quality and consider it as an Attribute. Recurring acts of kindness are the reason we call a person kind; recurrent events of choppiness are the reason we call the sea choppy, and so on. The difference between Events and Attributes, at the point where we derive one from the other, is in our conceptualising, and not in the world of reference. It follows that the question which attempts to establish a clear dividing-line between the two is doomed to go unanswered, as long as it is posed in general terms.

What is possible, however, is to ask in each individual case separately, Is the Entity conceptualised as involved in change, or as static? If static, then the concept relating to it is functioning as an Attribute, and will stand in a characteristically attributive relation to the Entity concerned, e.g., describing, identifying, classifying, etc. If the Entity is conceptualised as being involved in change, then probably it is better to consider that a process or experience is being ascribed to it, rather than an Attribute. In the foregoing example, “choppy” can be considered as describing the sea; hence it expresses an Attribute. No change in the sea, or in individual waves, is in focus.

For the same reason, the concept realised by “campaigner,” as attached to Jane, should probably be considered an Attribute. No change in Jane herself is in focus, and Attributes of this kind, classifying a person by a characteristic activity, are quite common. It is not campaigning events that are being referred to, but the kind of person Jane is.

On the other hand, in “She was given to devastating criticism,” both “given to . . . criticism” and “devastating” represent Events. The meaning is that she habitually criticised people and caused them to feel devastated (i.e., deeply upset and unable to defend their position).

18.2.3.3 Attributes of Time and Space

Time and space Attributes are derived in the same way that we derive concepts of yellowness and purity and loudness, by abstracting them from a variety of experiences. We experience the passage of time and abstract the concepts of past-ness, now-ness, and futurity. We experience spatial relations and abstract the concepts of here, there, beyond, north, inside, and so on. When we talk about “previous generations” or “our northern allies” we are expressing Attributes of time and space. Entities having these Attributes can of course be compared with each other with respect to time or place. Such comparisons give rise to temporal or spatial Relations.

A word of warning is perhaps needful here. We in the West tend to assume that all time and space references are to an objective, scientifically established continuum, divided up mathematically into hours and minutes, or into degrees of latitude and longitude, in the ways so familiar to us. But many communities manage very well without such a sophisticated viewpoint. If in their world view the world is flat, or the past is in front of you, then it is that kind of space and time to which they refer, not ours.

Time and space are so all-pervasive in our experience that the Attributes of occurring-at-certain-time or being-located-in-a-certain-place are more or less permanently present in all our thinking and communicating. And since they derive from our experience of time and space, they are outwardly referring like any other concepts. This is why, when an utterance is about a future event, the futureness, as well as the Event, is referential. Temporalness and spatialness provide a sort of inescapable prosody over our thinking and communicating: they can stretch over many larger units of messages, not just over one proposition. But they remain always referential. When I say that something will happen in the future, I am referring to the future.

18.2.4 Relations

Relations between concepts within a proposition (such as agent, undergoer, identification, description, and so on) have been mentioned in passing, and will be met with again, but will not be discussed exhaustively here. Our main purpose in this book is the analysis of whole messages, and for this, relations above the propositional level (discussed extensively in chapters 12, 16, and 17) are much more important.

18.2.5 Notation of the referential concepts

The structure of a proposition can be described in terms of the classes of concept involved, and it is sometimes useful to be able to use capital letters as class labels. Thus the proposition expressed in “He runs quickly” could be described as having the constituents T-E-A: Thing-Event-Attribute. Hitherto we have used Entity and Thing interchangeably, but since Entity and Event begin with the same capital letter, we will from now on use only the term Thing so as to distinguish this class clearly from Event when labelling the classes. It should be understood, however, that Thing as a technical term includes all kinds of animate beings as well as inanimate things and can also be used to denote complex concepts that function as a unitary “Thing” (see section 18.2.1).

18.3 Structural patterns of propositions

All propositions consist of at least two concepts, even single-word utterances, which are invariably verbal shorthands for propositions containing more than one concept.

There are two classes of proposition, according to whether an Event is involved or not. When a proposition contains an Event concept, that concept functions as the central element; the roles of other concepts in the proposition are determined by their relation to the Event. Such propositions are called Event propositions.

Propositions that contain no Event have a Thing as the central element. These are called Attributive propositions.

The difference between Event propositions and Attributive propositions is more than simply structural. Event propositions refer to something happening or changing. Thing-centred propositions refer to a situation which is envisaged as unchanging, or stable, throughout the period under consideration. The two kinds of proposition also function very differently in the total patterning of messages. The distinction is therefore of some importance.

18.3.1 Event propositions

18.3.1.1 The structure of Event propositions

The central element in an Event proposition, the Event itself, determines the relations of all the other elements to itself and to each other. Thus one T may be the agent of the Event and another its patient, as in “He picked it up”: He (agent) picked-up it (known object, patient). One T may be the experiencer, and another the experienced, as in “He saw it”: He (experiencer) saw it (known object, experienced). One T may be the undergoer of a process, of which another is the agent or instrument, as in “My window was broken by the boy next door”: My window (undergoer) was broken (process) by the boy next door (agent).

Sometimes only one T is involved in a proposition, as in “He burst out laughing”: He suddenly began-to-laugh heartily. Sometimes three T’s are involved, as in “The nurse gave the baby to its mother” and “He received a gold watch from his colleagues.”

It is important to notice that any given Event is always associated with the same number of T’s, in the same relationship. Thus laughing is always associated with one T, picking up with two T’s, and giving with three T’s, always in the relationships just mentioned. (Additional T’s may be involved, as in “He picked it up for her,” but here we are concerned only with those elements that invariably occur in connection with that Event.) The T’s associated with a given Event, combined with the Relations in which they stand to that Event, are called the “relational framework” of the Event. This relational framework is a universal, deriving from the real-life situation being conceptualised. It therefore does not vary with surface-structure conventions. In English, for example, the verb “answer” is normally used without any overt reference to the addressee, whereas the verb “tell” requires such a mention. (Compare “She answered that she liked her job,” and “She told him that she liked her job.”) But the referential framework of these Events includes the addressee in both cases, because in real life speech events are addressed to a person.

All the elements in the relational framework are present in the proposition, even if they are not all present in the verbal form expressing the proposition. This is tantamount to saying that we cannot possibly verbalise everything we mean, and that we have conventions for omitting overt mention; nevertheless we mean all the elements, though we do not say them. Thus an Event like cut or sew or chop always has an instrument in the relational framework, even if it is not realised in surface structure, and Events like paint, draw and write always have a product.

18.3.1.2 Different classes of Event

Actions, experiences, and processes have already been distinguished in section 18.2.2.1. Some Events are always experiences (e.g., hearing), others are actions (e.g., writing, climbing) or processes (melting, breaking). This does not provide us with mutually exclusive categories, but with a useful distinction between Event classes and, therefore, between Event propositions.

A different classification is sometimes useful, based on the content of the Event and on its function in relation to other parts of the message. From this point of view, some Events can be labelled as cognitive Events, others as speech Events, and still others as motion Events. Cognitive Events such as thinking, realising, remembering, hoping, believing, etc., share one conceptual area and in addition are regularly associated with one or more propositions specifying the content of the cognition (i.e., what it is that is hoped, thought, or remembered).

Speech Events (saying, shouting, advising, praying, hinting, arguing) constitute a similar class. Like cognitive Events, they are commonly associated with a specification of their content. They are also associated with an addressee.

A further class of interest is that of motion Events (coming, going, arriving, rising, falling, surrounding). All motion Events tend to have a similar relational framework, involving the starting point, the end point and the path of the motion. Frequently a proposition involving motion initiates a new stage in a narrative.

18.3.1.3 Event propositions and import

It is not possible to hold concepts in the mind without their having some significance, some import. If the concepts in my mind involve my daughter and baking a cake, then I must be wishing that she would bake a cake, or asserting that she has baked a cake, or asking if she has done so. Appropriately related concepts are not sufficient to constitute a proposition; they must also have a significance, that is, either an import or a presentational function (describing, providing setting, etc.).

Notice that this “internal” significance, which is inherent in the proposition itself, is distinct from the import of the larger unit of which the proposition is a part. This is especially true of information-providing propositions, which may build up into a larger unit whose purposive significance is not informative at all: it may provide motivation or explanation, or it may simply orient the recipient of the message by providing settings.

18.3.2 Attributive propositions

Attributive propositions do not contain an Event: the central element is a Thing. The other obligatory element is either an Attribute, or another Thing in a specific relationship with the central Thing: these ascribe qualities and characteristics, either temporary or permanent, to the central Thing.

Attributive propositions normally refer to a state which is stable, not envisaged as changing within the time span under consideration. Thus “She is happy” refers to a state that may change in the future, but is not considered as changing at the time referred to in the utterance. Some utterances refer to situations considered to be invariably true, for example, “Whisks are kitchen utensils” and “Deceiving people is wrong.”

Attributive propositions tend to have a much wider variety of verbal expressions than Event propositions. It is therefore rather more difficult, initially, to derive the underlying proposition from its expression. It is also more difficult to correlate the different expressions of one proposition from language to language. As always, thinking behind the words to the meaning being expressed will usually solve the problem.

It goes without saying that if we are attributing qualities or characteristics to any person, thing, or situation whatsoever, then the number of qualities involved is infinite. “The struggle is at a crucial stage,” “She is my new secretary,” “His temperature is up one degree,” and “Using aerosols is antisocial” are all realisations of attributive propositions. Reducing this referential abundance to some kind of order is by no means easy. We suggest here a broad categorisation, which can be further refined as required. It is based on the analysis of the Attribute in the proposition. The Attribute may ascribe to the Thing a quality or characteristic, or membership of a generic class, or a specific relationship to another Thing. We will consider these in turn, then the question of complex Things in Attributive propositions, and finally a borderline case.

18.3.2.1 Thing-is-Attribute (T-A)

The most straightforward kind of Attributive proposition is that which ascribes a quality or characteristic to a central Thing. The quality may be a physical one, as in “Our son-in-law is tall” or “Jim’s new car is bright red.” It may be a temporary state, as in “Jane was hot.” It may concern character or social situation, as in “Mary is so cheerful” or “Terry is still single.” It may be evaluative, as in “The view from their window is superb” or “That kind of behaviour is despicable.”

Many different technical systems can be used to pinpoint qualities and characteristics with great accuracy. Instead of “It is very heavy,” we may say, “It weighs 25 kilos.” (Note that Attributive propositions can be expressed using verbs other than “to be.”) Instead of saying that water is almost boiling, we can, if greater accuracy is needed, say that it is at 95° C. Attributions in terms of formal systems are still attributions of quality; they are essentially T-A.

18.3.2.2 Thing-is-member-of-class (T-class)

A thing may be described as being a member of a certain class. In “Robert is a doctor,” “doctor” is a generic term applicable to a large number of people: Robert is characterised as belonging to that class. We often classify people by a characteristic activity in this way, as in “She is an expert swimmer” or “Fred used to be a photographer.” Inanimate objects can also be described by their class membership, as in “Squills are wild flowers” and “This building is Early Tudor.”

Classification is by no means a straightforward matter. Often Entities in the same class share numerous characteristics, and these may not all be in focus when the classifying term is used. If in the context of a lecture on “Chinese art forms through the ages” the comment is made that a particular vase is Ming dynasty, the reference is likely to be primarily to the date of the vase. The underlying proposition might well not be an Attributive proposition, but an Event one: (Someone) made this vase during the Ming dynasty. But if the comment is made by a proud hostess showing her treasures to a guest, then she almost certainly has primarily in mind characteristics such as design, substance, and value. This can be confirmed by the fact that it is possible to say, “This vase is Ming dynasty, but the design is unusual.” It is assumed that a design of a particular kind has already been communicated by the classifying term “Ming dynasty.” We must never assume that all aspects of a complex concept are being communicated: the context (situational or verbal) is the determining factor.

There is another danger to be avoided with Attributes that classify. Philosophically speaking, logicians can talk about anything in terms of class membership. For instance, “Mary is happy,” an attribution of a quality to Mary, could be taken as “Mary is a member of the class of happy people.” This kind of sidetrack should be avoided. We are concerned with analysing what people mean when they communicate. Each society makes its own classifications and has vocabulary for talking about classes: in English we recognise a class of people who practise medicine and call them “doctors,” but we do not recognise a class of people who are happy.

It is true that attributes and class membership overlap, inasmuch as any generic class is established on the basis of some shared attribute. What we are concerned with here is that when we communicate generically we are not simply ascribing an Attribute to a Thing as we do in T-A propositions: we are saying, rather, that by virtue of having a certain Attribute the Thing belongs to a recognised group or class. “A whisk is a kitchen utensil” relates whisks to a recognised group on the basis of the shared attribute of being used in cooking. “A whisk is an object used more by women than by men,” on the other hand, is establishing class status in a very forced way. It would be hard to think, instantly, of numerous other members of that class, whereas it would not be hard to think of other kitchen utensils, which is a genuinely established class in our culture.

It should be borne in mind that classification is culture specific: Westerners distinguish trees from bushes on the basis of physical characteristics, but other cultures distinguish useful trees-and-bushes (e.g., those with edible fruit) from non-useful trees-and-bushes. Classes of Entities do not exist “out there” with appropriate labels attached: classification is the way a particular culture group thinks. In the light of this, it is not surprising that generic classes have “fuzzy borders”—areas of overlap. It is a waste of time to debate whether tomatoes are to be considered as fruit or vegetables: they have some fruit-like attributes (their biological ones) and some vegetable-like attributes (their culinary ones).

18.3.2.3 Thing-is-related-to-Thing (T-T)

A proposition relating one Thing to another is the easiest type of Attributive proposition to identify, because there are always at least two Things involved: the central Thing is described by its relation to some other Thing. The status of the two Things with respect to each other gives rise to the attributive relation involved: events and qualities do not come into it.

The two Things can be related spatially, giving a Locative relation. Sometimes the second Thing is a place: “He is in Cyprus at the moment” or “The shop was in Regent Street.” Two Things can also be related spatially although neither is inherently locative: “He is on the roof” or “Our house is in the old quarry.” Compass directions are a systematic way of relating two things spatially; these may be developed into a system of grid references. Conservationist groups sometimes announce a place of rendezvous in this way. “The walk will commence at the car park just off the A329 south of Thame, grid reference SP6705.” Here a Thing (the car park) is related both to another Thing (Thame) and to a technical system.

Another common relationship is that of possession or ownership. Examples are “That’s my pen,” “The violin belongs to Mary,” “Simon has a very nice Volvo.”

Also common is the part-whole relation, as in “The car has a roof-rack” or “This picture belongs to a famous collection.” It should by now be obvious why it is necessary to look deeper than the words in order to find the meaning. The picture does not belong to the collection in quite the same way as the violin belongs to Mary, nor does the car have the roof-rack in the same way as Simon has the Volvo.

A commonly occurring relation between living entities is that of kinship. When I say, “John is Naomi’s brother-in-law,” I am relating two Things, John and Naomi, in terms of a kinship system. This is equally true if one or both are referred to pronominally. If I say, “John is my son-in-law,” I am not simply describing John: I am relating two Things, John and myself, with respect to kinship.

Another relation commonly found is that of identity: when two Things previously thought of as separate entities are stated to be one and the same, they are identified: “Our John Brown is the one in the newspaper” or “Mrs. Phipps is your old friend Mary Simms.”

18.3.2.4 Complex Things

It is possible for any of the Things in an Attributive proposition to be complex. In the earlier example “Deceiving people is wrong,” deceiving people is considered as a Thing in that it enters into the type of relationship that other Things do. It would of course be possible to propositionalise the same surface-structure form as When people deceive other people, they are behaving wrongly. But our example is highly generic, and it also involves a timeless (unchanging) state. It is affirming that at any time, whenever people act so, they are behaving wrongly. Since it represents a state, it is more naturally handled in an Attributive proposition.

Another example involving complex Things would be, “That woman over there in the red jacket is the one I was telling you about.” We can conceptualise very complex Things and Events so that they function as simple ones: the fact that it takes more than one word to bring it before the mind is irrelevant.

18.3.2.5 A borderline case: Attribute or Event?

As mentioned before, Attributive propositions refer to a stable and unchanging state within a given time span. But this is also true of durative and habitual Events. In fact such events often seem to function in a way very similar to Attributive propositions. If we say, “The flower is in bud,” we feel as if we were talking about a state of the flower, not about something that was happening.

We have the same feeling when we talk about an Event as being in some way characteristic of a Thing, as in “This lever operates a pulley mechanism.” On any specific occasion, a lever operating a pulley would be considered an Event, but in this example that characteristic, much-repeated Event is being used rather to describe the lever in terms of its function. The relationship between the lever and the pulley is not any of the attributive ones (for example, location, possession, part-whole) but is much more specific. We can hardly call this proposition a T-T attributive. It seems best, on the whole, to say that there is a fuzzy border here between Event propositions and Attributive propositions. An Event proposition in which a durative or habitual Event relates two Things is structurally an Event proposition. Nevertheless, if the central Thing is classified or described by the Event, the proposition will function much more like an Attributive one. Thus we can say, “The lever is ten inches long, made of steel, and operates a pulley mechanism” with a fairly strong feeling that we are in the realm of attribution throughout. Our analysis must be determined by function in context.

18.3.2.6 Attributive propositions and import

Attributive propositions can carry any of the three imports, although all our examples so far have had only informational import. There are, however, some restrictions, because states do not always operate as events do.

As far as informational import goes, most information-providing propositions have corresponding information-seeking propositions as their counterparts, and there are few restrictions here. “He is tall” realises an Attributive proposition, but equally so do “Is he tall?” and “How tall is he?” The change of information status does not affect the attributiveness.

Some Attributive propositions are inherently expressive, specifically those containing Attributes of value, approval, and disapproval. “He is dishonest” or “They were extremely courageous” realise evaluative propositions. “I am so happy” is (with the appropriate intonation) expressive of emotion, whereas “Mike was happy” is informational.

The most restricted import is the volitional. There are a great many states that cannot be commanded since they are quite outside the control of the person concerned. Physical attributes, especially, cannot be commanded. “Be six feet tall” doesn’t make sense, but “Be patient” does.

With respect to their import at higher levels, the function of Attributive propositions differs from that of Event propositions. If the core material involves events, then material that involves states is likely to be in a supporting role, and vice versa.

18.3.2.7 Presentational functions of Attributes: description and identification

There are two ways, presentationally, in which an Attribute (of whatever kind) can attach to a central Thing. (These relations occur simultaneously with the referential relations already discussed.) An Attribute is ascribed to a Thing either to describe it or to identify it. In either case the Thing is topical; that is, it is the entity under attention.

When Attributes are ascribed, descriptively, to the topical Thing, increasing detail is added at that point and an increasingly vivid picture is built up. But when Attributes are ascribed to the Thing in order to identify it, then those identifying Attributes have to be so specific as to distinguish this Thing uniquely from all other similar Things in the context. “My car is grey” describes it, but “My car is the grey one over there with the black roof” identifies it. In order for attributes to identify a Thing, they have to be unique. A particular object can be identified by saying, “This is the carburettor,” only if there is just one carburettor around. Since engines are normally equipped with only one, the classification identifies “this” uniquely.

Normally, also, the unique attribute ascribed to the topical Thing is something already familiar to the hearer: it is a bit difficult to identify something in terms of a characteristic of which the hearer is ignorant. (Some lecturers regularly attempt this feat, leaving behind them a trail of failed identifications and bewildered students.) What happens in a normal identification is this: the topical Thing is foregrounded; a unique attribution, already familiar to the hearer, is brought into the foreground and linked up with the topic in an identification relationship. Description builds up; identification links up.

Frequently a great deal of the linked attribution is assumed. If I say “He is the curate at St. Philip’s,” then I am assuming that my hearer knows the church of that name, knows that a curate is a clergyman attached to a church, and probably knows that St. Philip’s has only one curate at any given time—though if he is unaware of this latter fact, my use of the definite article will tell him so. In this example, then, the curate at St. Philip’s is an attribution which is both familiar and unique, and it is attached to the already foregrounded topic he in the relationship of identification.

19

PROPOSITIONALISING A TEXT

19.1 The heart of the message

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19.2.2 Unpacking shorthands

19.2.2.1 Unpacking abstract nouns

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19.6.2 The Daffodil Leaves text

19.6.2.1 The propositionalised text

19.6.2.2 Comments on the propositions

The relationship between meaning and surface structure is a two-way street. Meaning is the starting point. It generates surface forms. Meaning is also the end point, arrived at by interpreting surface forms. Generating surface forms from a meaning base is something we learn at an early age in our mother tongue; in any other tongue it is a difficult process, involving complexities which lie outside the scope of our present study. In this book we do not tackle the problem of generating surface structures in specific languages; we concentrate on the other side of the meaning-surface correlation, that of interpreting texts and writing down their meaning structure.

19.1 The heart of the message

The essential elements in meaning structure are the reference and the significance of a communication. It is these factors only which constitute propositions. All other elements in meaning structure—context, social factors, emotion, style and so on—are handled as prosodies of the proposition or at some level of the hierarchy above the proposition. With these dealt with elsewhere, we are freed from all other detail to get down to the referential/purposive heart of the message—exactly what is being communicated and why. This we analyse in terms of an inter-related network of propositions.

There is frequently a mismatch with respect to length between propositions and their expressions: propositions are often fuller and more detailed than their counterpart expressions, since in normal speech we rarely say explicitly all that we mean. But the relationship between the two is not haphazard—the analyst certainly may not fill out the proposition with any meaning he fancies to be implied: correlations and restrictions must be observed. Since all the referential material in the message is grounded in the propositions, the constraining criteria are mostly concerned with ensuring that this referential material appears in the propositions unambiguously.

19.2 Propositionalising all referential content unambiguously

19.2.1 Disambiguating deictics and pro-forms

Deictics and pro-forms are among the devices speakers use to avoid excessive repetition in discourses. We say “this one” instead of specifying an object, “there” instead of specifying a place, “they” instead of naming the participants. Of course we do this using the conventions made available by our language, and in such a way that our exact reference is clear to our hearers. It is this exactness of reference which must be made available in the proposition, in a precise way that is independent of the surface-structure conventions of natural languages.

In the analysis of the Shellfish text, for example, the propositional analysis would have to make clear that “These” in segment 3 encapsulates a reference not to the immediately preceding “cockles and oysters,” but to the earlier “infections.” Deictics may refer either backwards or forwards. In segment 3 of Deaths in Flight (“This gives a rate . . .”), “This” refers backwards. The same deictic may refer forwards, as when we say, “This at least is certain . . .” and then go on in the rest of the sentence to make clear what we consider to be certain.

Pronouns are frequently ambiguous. If several participants are foregrounded, to which one does “he” refer? Does “you” mean one addressee, or more than one? Is “we” inclusive of the hearers, or not?

In the Badger text, “we” and “us” in segments 13, 17, 22 exclude the reader; the reference is to the members of the League. In Fountains the repeated references to “our” and “us” in segments 8–18 undoubtedly include the reader; Priestley is speaking on behalf of his fellow citizens.

Pro-verbs are less common than pronouns, but when they occur, they must be made referentially clear in the proposition. If we say, “Frank resigned the following morning; Jane did likewise,” the proposition realised by the last clause is Jane also resigned the following morning. Some verbs, while falling short of the total genericness of pro-verbs, are nevertheless very general in reference. For example, “leave” can mean to omit to do almost anything. In Daffodil Leaves (12), “leave the flower stalk” means do not cut the flower stalk, and the propositionalisation should make this clear.

Certain grammatical constructions can also result in ambiguity of reference, when there is a mismatch between the form and the meaning. An example is found in Barefoot 18, which reads “a four-person factory in Burkina Faso making pots from old cars.” In spite of the grammatical construction, it was not the factory that was making pots, but the four people employed in it; it is they who must be made the referential agents of the Event in the proposition.

19.2.2 Unpacking shorthands

Message senders use available conventions to save the labour of saying everything explicitly. Sometimes these shorthands are grammatical constructions and sometimes lexical items covering a whole situation in a word. In English, for example, “survivor” means someone who escapes from a situation which has caused other people to die. “Predator” means an animal which catches, kills, and eats other animals. Such words may represent one concept, but it is a very complex concept: in certain circumstances the details may need to be carefully unpacked. Such compact lexicalisation, however, is not a predictable matter. So in the next three sections we will give attention instead to known trouble spots related to referential exactness: abstract nouns, adjectives, “of” constructions. These are typical problem areas in European languages. Others can undoubtedly be added to the list.

19.2.2.1 Unpacking abstract nouns

Many abstract nouns, such as “justice,” “production,” and “concern,” refer to Events, not Things, and their use disguises surface omissions: who was acting justly or producing something? Since the agent or patient of the event is often omitted in the surface structure, it must be restored in the proposition. In Radon 7, the word “concern” (“the apparent lack of concern”) refers not to a Thing, but to a state of mind. But whose minds? In the context the concealed experiencer is probably the same as on the other side of the contrast, namely, the general public and officials. Hence the proposition is Most people (including officials) appear-not-feeling-anxious about radon.

In the Deaths in Flight text, the verb “die” is used initially, but all later references to the same event (dying from natural causes while in flight) are realised by the noun “death” (2, 4, 7), which is a convenient shorthand. One way of maintaining neutrality in propositions with respect to the conventions of different languages is to use verbs in the proposition to represent Events, and nouns to represent Things. Thus one of the propositions underlying segment 4 of Deaths in Flight (“most deaths were in middle aged men”) would be Most (of the 577) people who died were middle-aged men. In Fountains 11, the nominal phrase “increased production” would be represented as a verb in the underlying proposition: so that (people) may produce/make more (goods).

19.2.2.2 Unpacking adjectives

Adjectives can disguise a variety of different relations. “The tall teacher” expresses a descriptive relation, attributing a physical characteristic of tallness to the teacher. But “the biology teacher” does not attribute to him a quality of biologicalness, nor does “the former teacher” attribute formerness. The implied events and states must be spelt out, as in person who teaches (people) biology and person who used to be a teacher.

A word of warning is in place here: not all adjectives realise Attributes. A phrase such as “dental treatment” does not represent an A-T structure, but a T-E-T structure. We are not talking of a Thing with a dental quality, but of an Event (providing medical attention) performed upon Things (i.e., teeth) by some human Thing (i.e., a dentist).

Similar problems arise when two nouns are juxtaposed, the first modifying the second. In our texts, “marmalade factory” (Barefoot 17) means a factory where marmalade is made, “radon deaths” (Radon 5) means deaths caused by radon, “lung cancer” (Radon 1) means cancer located in the lungs, “London wall” (London Wall 1) means the wall (which formerly surrounded) London. Sometimes both elements in the complex nominal phrase need restructuring in the proposition. In London Wall 6, for example, “a seven-week investigation” means (the archaeologists) were investigating for a period of seven weeks.

19.2.2.3 Unpacking genitive constructions

Many languages use possessive (“genitive”) nouns and pronouns as well as “of” phrases to express widely differing relationships. In writing propositions, it is best to restrict the use of such genitives to instances which refer to possessive, kinship and part-whole relations, since these are the most widely used meanings of the construction. Any other relation signalled by a genitive or “of” construction must therefore be expressed more fully. In Badger 2, “the names of our villages and towns” means the names (which people call) our villages and towns. In Shellfish 4 “contamination of estuaries by sewage” means sewage is-contaminating estuaries. In Multiple Sclerosis 9 “the racial mix of the three cities” means the number of people who belong to different races who live in the three cities. Obviously English is a good example of a language which makes one grammatical shorthand serve many purposes.

Possessive pronouns also may need to be spelt out more fully. In Badger 22, “our special enamel badge” does not mean a badge which we (exclusive) own. Rather, it means a badge which represents/symbolises our (exclusive) organisation.

19.3 Making the relational framework explicit

The relational framework of an Event consists of those concepts necessarily associated with it in the meaning structure whether or not they are realised in surface structure (see section 18.3.1.1). This is particularly important in cross-language studies since different languages realise the same framework in different ways.

For instance, in English, in “The woman poured out the medicine and drank it,” the second clause does not overtly mention who did the drinking. Yet all English speakers know that the medicine was drunk by the same woman who poured it. Our conventions work that way. The underlying proposition, however, has to fill out the relational framework of the Event “drink.” Thus the propositional transcription of that utterance is The woman poured-out the medicine—short time-lapse—the woman drank the medicine.

If, however, a Kasena speaker was verbalising the same propositions (i.e., meaning the same thing), he would say (translated more or less literally), “The woman poured out the medicine she drank.” In Kasem, the conventions are different: the agent-T has to be mentioned each time, whereas a repeated patient-T is omitted. But any Kasena listener would know what it was that the woman drank; she drank the same medicine that she had just poured out, and the Kasena speaker had said so, using the appropriate conventions. Meanings can be expressed by a zero in a known pattern, as well as by words.

Note, however, that exactly the same propositions underlie the two different surface structures in Kasem and in English. The meaning is the same in both cases, with all the related elements present; it is the expression that differs.

How, then, does one establish the relational framework of a given Event? For this is obviously of considerable importance. Essentially, we have to think back to the referential situation. If we are envisaging an event of drinking, we cannot envisage the drinking of medicine without someone doing the drinking. Nor can we envisage someone drinking, without their drinking something. Both elements are inevitably present in the referential situation, so both are part of the relational framework, and hence of the proposition.

Similarly, all motion involves a certain trajectory or path: motion is either from somewhere to somewhere else, or else in a circle, or upwards or downwards, and so on. Different motion Events involve different trajectories, but each one involves some trajectory—one cannot have a motionless motion. And the trajectory of the motion Event is part of its relational framework, whether or not it is expressed. Thus “She ran home from school” expresses both the starting point and the end point of the motion. “She ran home” expresses only the end point. But in the relational framework the starting point is present also (presumably derived from elsewhere in the discourse), since the running had to start somewhere. It is not possible to start running without being in a particular location when one does so.

A construction in which part of the relational framework is often omitted is the passive. The patient of the Event is expressed, but the agent may remain unexpressed, as in “The vase got broken” and “The guests were shown to their places.” Obviously somebody must have broken the vase and someone must have shown the guests to their places. If the agent is known, this should be included in the propositionalised form. If the agent is unknown, or not in focus, then a general term such as “someone” can be used. Depending on the purpose of the propositionalising, and to some extent on the patterns of the language concerned, it may in rare circumstances (e.g., for reasons of prominence or information flow) be advisable to retain the passive construction, but in general greater accuracy is achieved by using the active, even if the agent has to be “unknown persons” or “someone not in focus.” The active is preferred also because of the large number of languages which have no passive construction.

Our texts provide a variety of illustrations of this point. In Daffodil Leaves 2, “Leaves should be left” means You should not cut or Do not cut: the gardener asking the question is clearly the agent intended. In Badger 9 “the animals are protected” means The law protects the animals, and in segment 20 of the same text, “will be gratefully received” means We (excl.) will receive gratefully. Sometimes the agent is highly generic, as in Multiple Sclerosis 1, where “Multiple sclerosis is known to occur” means (People especially doctors) know that multiple sclerosis occurs.

It is not always necessary, however, to specify an unknown or unfocussed agent. For instance, the Fountains text, which is highly expressive, uses referential material not in order to represent the world accurately, but in order to express certain emotions and values. It would be counter to the ethos of the text to insist on supplying an agent for “coloured lights are played on them” (3) and “the last colour is whisked away” (5). Presumably some anonymous council employee performed both these activities, directly or indirectly, but it is doubtful if he was present in any sense at all to the mind of the writer. It therefore best represents the writer’s conceptual referrings to maintain the passive here in the corresponding propositions.

It must be borne in mind that not all Events are realised by verbs and that they have the same relational framework however they are realised. Thus in Multiple Sclerosis 6 “the increase” refers to an Event not a thing: something increased between 1961 and 1981. The relational framework has to be filled out. In this case what increased was the proportion of the population who were ill with multiple sclerosis. In Barefoot 21, “knowledge” likewise refers to an Event. “Intimate knowledge of local conditions” means they know very well (the details of) how people live in that (small) area.

19.4 Representing only referential material

19.4.1 Excluding words used nonreferentially

Propositions are meant to encapsulate the referential material of a message. But words are sometimes used for purposes other than referring. When they do, they must not be represented in propositions. They should be handled some other way.

Examples have been given in earlier chapters. “I’ve been hoping you’d find time to visit Albert” is not referring to hoping, but to visiting. It really means although you are busy, please (politeness signal) visit Albert (mitigated). Similarly, “I’d like you to finish this by tomorrow” is not referring to liking. It is mitigating a directive.

Words are also used to signal information source or value. Thus, in “He’s coming tomorrow, I gather,” “gather” is not referring to an Event, either literally or metaphorically. It is being used to indicate that the authority for the information is not mine—I derived it from someone else. Thus the proposition representing the surface structure form is He will-come tomorrow (second-hand information value). First-person cognitive verbs are a danger area for unwary analysts, as are passive cognitives. In Shellfish 4, “The cause is thought to be . . .” simply means probably the cause is.

Words can be used also with a purely orienting purpose. Thus in Barefoot 20, “The message is clear” simply signals that a conclusion which the author considers incontrovertible is about to be presented. Such a clause should not be given a propositional equivalent. The author is not talking about a clear message; he is presenting one. Similarly in Kasem, when “He got up” occurs in a narrative, it signals the start of a new sequence of purposive activity and has no reference whatsoever to the physical motions of the participant.

19.4.2 Figures of speech

In all languages known to us, people frequently use words and expressions to mean something which is referentially quite different from the normal face-value usage. We call such uses figures of speech.

Figures are many and varied. The Kasena of Ghana say, “My insides are white,” meaning I am happy. In English we have many fixed figures, often restricted in their occurrence patterns, and many live figures which can be used with great flexibility. “Don’t throw out the baby with the bath water” is a fixed figure: nothing further can be added about the baby or the bath water except semi-humorously. But the expression is not referring to babies at all. It means, roughly, Do not reject something valuable because you rightly reject something less valuable associated with it.

Many similes are live figures, invented for the occasion and capable of grammatical and lexical variation. An example is in Barefoot 22, “like posting a starving man a ‘Get Well’ card.” In live similes like this, there is a genuine reference to starving men and Get Well cards. These Things should therefore appear in the corresponding propositionalisation. But fixed figures, whose reference is not literal, should not be represented literally in a propositionalisation. Rather, the actual reference should be made clear. Hence, “She took it in her stride” is the surface-structure expression of she continued-to-be unperturbed, and “He turned over a new leaf” means he began to act/behave in a much better way than he had behaved before. (In a specific context, the kind of improved behaviour could be specified more exactly.)

Figures of speech can be very difficult to re-express for propositional purposes in nonfigurative language, but it is essential to make the attempt. “Loopholes in the law” in Badger 8 means (Because) the law does not deal with/apply to every aspect of the present situation. “The night rains emeralds” in Fountains 4 means (The drops look like) bright green rain against the (dark) night (sky).

Much more difficult than the reference of figures is their significance. Often the very fact that a figure is used at all carries a significance over and above the reference conveyed. “This is a pretty kettle of fish!” conveys considerably more consternation than the equivalent “This is a very difficult situation.” The same is true of rhetorical questions, which can be used to rebuke someone, to imply the opposite of what is apparently said, to emphasise a point, to avoid giving a direct answer, and for a variety of other reasons. Only a knowledge of the culture will make clear the significance in a particular language on a particular occasion.

There are some fixed forms of expression in English which, although not fully figurative, have meanings which could not be deduced by adding up their constituent parts. “Second-hand clothes” does not refer to hands. “Eating out” does not refer to picnics. Other examples are “by and large,” “at all,” “at first blush,” “to wash up,” etc. If such expressions are used referentially, the reference must be made clear. If the expression is not being used referentially, then its significance must be assessed and inserted at the appropriate point in the analysis, often as a prosody. “At first blush,” for example, means roughly When we first but uncritically consider this matter, and it has the significance of introducing an evaluative comment which one intends to retract or modify very soon.

19.5 Propositional displays of texts

Ideally, since propositions represent meanings which are language-independent universals, it would be desirable to represent concepts in our transcriptions in some language-independent way. The various sign-languages used by the deaf represent meanings without the use of words, but these cannot be put on paper and would not be widely understood. Stick figures would be inadequate, Chinese-style characters incomprehensible to most. Like it or not, the need to be understood restricts us to already familiar signals of meaning, the only candidates being words.

We are therefore going to use English as the medium for writing down propositional meaning, as we have been doing informally throughout. We will, however, use it in a regularised and formal way, in order to make the meaning unambiguously clear, and as complete as possible. The conventions which we have devised for the transcription of propositions in English have been designed to keep as close as possible to the features which are universal in languages. For example, Events are expressed by finite verbs whenever possible, since all languages exhibit finite verb forms (not all exhibit subordination).

The following are the conventions to be observed in writing down propositions:

(1) There should be no mismatch between the meaning and the words used. Events should be represented by verbs, Things by nouns, Attributes by adjectives and adverbs. If several words are needed to express one concept, these should be joined by hyphens.

(2) Events should be represented wherever possible by finite verbs in active voice.

(3) Import should be represented by the grammar: informationals by statement or question forms; expressives by lexical items (“happy,” “ought,” etc.) or by “How . . . !”; volitionals by imperatives or redundant lexicalisation (“I want . . .”) in parentheses.

(4) All lexical items should be used in their primary sense (their common, literal, referential usage) only.

(5) All surface figures of speech should be represented by their referential equivalent, with their significance in parentheses.

(6) All concepts in the relational framework of an Event should be included. If they are not realised in surface structure, they should be placed within parentheses, unless the nonrealisation is grammatically predictable, in which case they have been adequately signalled by zero in a known system and parentheses would be inappropriate.

(7) Other implied information should be included in parentheses and its source indicated (e.g., comparisons, deictics, and pro-forms, or sources outside the co-text such as “culturally understood” or “reasoning along purposive chain”).

(8) If verbal forms have non-referential value, this should be indicated in parentheses, (e.g., topic, schematic marker, mitigation, etc.). Prosodies may be indicated by an asterisk or by type style, with details provided in separate explanatory notes.

Some texts, owing to the characteristics of their language, genre, and style, transfer very readily to propositional form. If most of the meaning of the text is carried by the reference and import, then this will probably be so. Daffodil Leaves is a case in point. The propositional display of this text, which is found in the next section, is quite recognisable. In languages that are characterised by fairly short clauses and a tendency to communicate using verbs rather than nouns, propositions tend to resemble the corresponding expressions quite closely.

Texts in other types of languages, and most texts in English, offer the analyst more of a challenge. Yet it is precisely in such cases that the attempt to propositionalise is most valuable: where the exact reference is heavily veiled by a cloak of abstract nouns, passive constructions, or figures of speech, then disentangling the reference from everything else that is going on is highly rewarding. The Shellfish text, for example, does not refer to a single agent from beginning to end, being cast in a strongly passive mould. Any attempt to express the reference in propositional form looks initially like a highly distorted version of the text, but it has the advantage of drawing attention to a characteristic of scientific genre which is totally different from normal English usage.

A text that has many abstract nouns will consist of many more propositions than clauses. A text that has many figures of speech will probably prove to be rather vague and generic referentially, but very rich emotively. Similarly, the propositional display of a conversation may look very flat, drained of all its verve and vigour, but it does in fact convey all the content that was actually communicated. The verve and vigour belonged not to the content but to the personal relationships being expressed. If the analysis has been properly done then the nonreferential aspects of the text—the enthusiasm or reluctance, the social closeness, the humour of the participants—will not be lost, but will have found their place at the appropriate point in the analysis, especially in the emotional prosodies and the supporting roles of the schema.

Propositionalising a text is a technique which can be learned only by practice, not by definitions or examples. It must be exercised with sensitivity and a flexible outlook. It is a tool, not a taskmaster. Very often there is no right or wrong way of formulating propositions, but simply the most suitable way, for a specific text or a specific purpose. The propositional display, with its accompanying prosodies, is not an end in itself, but a key to open a door into language.

19.6 Analysed examples of propositional displays

19.6.1 Short examples

Segment 3 of the Joggers text, “a jogger rapped on his window to ask the time,” is propositionalised as follows:

3a A jogger rapped on the window (of the motorist’s car)

3b The jogger asked the motorist

3c “What is the time?”

Note that in 3a the possessive pronoun “his” is disambiguated. In 3b the event of asking, which in surface structure is only implied, is here stated overtly. The addressee of ask is also stated overtly, as required by the relational framework. In 3c the content required by the relational framework of ask is provided.

The next example is segment 1 of the London Wall text:

“A 10-metre section of the London Wall has been found by Museum of London archaeologists.”

It is propositionalised as follows:

1a Archaeologists have found part of a wall. (Prominence on wall)

1b The wall (formerly) (surrounded) London

1c The archaeologists (work for) the Museum of London

1d The part of the wall is 10 metres long

Note that in 1a the passive construction is made active. The prominence on wall conveyed by the passive is noted separately. In 1b the relation between “London” and “Wall” is clarified (from general knowledge of the world). In 1c the relation between “Museum of London” and “archaeologists” is clarified with “Museum of London” being retained since it is taken as a title. In 1d the numerical attribute is made an attributive proposition.

Segments 4 and 5 of the Radon text, “Radon acts synergistically with tobacco, so that few radon deaths are in non-smokers,” are propositionalised as follows:

4a Radon causes people (to get lung cancer)

4b especially when those people (4a) also smoke tobacco

5a (so that) radon causes few people to (get lung cancer and) die

5b (the class of people (5a)) who do not smoke tobacco

Note that in 4a the content of generic verb “acts” is supplied from the preceding context. In 4b a whole proposition underlies the noun “tobacco.” In 5a the Event die underlies the Abstract noun “deaths” and “radon deaths” means radon causes people to die. Here “deaths” means only people who die because of lung cancer; no other cause of death is being considered. Hence this factor is included in parentheses. The result relationship expressed by “so that” would be shown in the relational structure on the left if a full display were being represented. In 5b, “non-smokers” expresses a habitual Event, which requires a separate proposition. The identifying relation that defines people in 5a is given in parentheses in 5b but would normally be part of the relational structure.

19.6.2 The Daffodil Leaves text

In order to illustrate the propositionalising of a longer stretch of text, the Daffodil Leaves text will now be presented in full. Each numbered segment of text will be followed immediately by the corresponding proposition(s) to facilitate comparison. If more than one proposition underlies the text segment, these will be labelled a, b, c, and so on, as required. Comments will be found at the end of the display on the factors taken into account in determining the propositional forms.

19.6.2.1 The propositionalised text

1 How soon can I cut the leaves off my daffodils?

1a How soon can I cut the leaves off the daffodils

1b that I (am cultivating)?

2 Leaves should be left for six weeks

2 Leave the leaves (on the plants) for six weeks

3 after the last flower has died

3 after the last flower has died

4 before cutting back.

4 before (you) cut back (the leaves).

5 This period is essential

5 You must leave the leaves (on the plant) for this period (i.e., six weeks after the last flower has died)

6 to rebuild foodstores in the bulb

6a in order that (the plant) may replenish the foodstores

6b which are in the bulb

7 so that it can grow and flower the following year.

7a in order that (the plant) may grow the following year

7b and in order that (the plant) may flower the following year.

8 You should remove flowerheads

8 Remove flowerheads

9 as soon as they die

9 as soon as they (the flowerheads) die

10 so that energy is not diverted

10 in order that (the plant) does not divert its energy (away from the bulb)

11 into seed production,

11 and as a result it (the plant) produces seeds.

12 but leave the flower stalk.

12 And do not remove/cut back the flower stalks.

13 If you find the fading bulb leaves unsightly

13a If you dislike

13b how the bulb leaves look

13c while they (the bulb leaves) are fading

14 try planting the daffodils under a spreading deciduous shrub such as hydrangea, flowering quince or fishbone cotoneaster.

14 plant the daffodil (bulbs) under a spreading deciduous shrub such as hydrangea, flowering quince, or fishbone cotoneaster.

15 The daffodils will stand out against the bare branches of the shrub in the early spring,

15 (People, defocused) will be able to see the daffodils easily against the bare branches of the shrub in the early spring.

16 but later on the fading bulb leaves will be disguised by the shrub’s leaves and flowers.

16a Later on, the shrub’s leaves and flowers will disguise the bulb leaves

16b while they (the bulb leaves) are fading.

19.6.2.2 Comments on the propositions

Segment 1 There is only one propositional issue in segment 1 and that is the use of “my” with “daffodils.” “My daffodils” could mean the ones I own, but in this context the “my” is more likely to mean the ones that I am cultivating. (The form of the question seems to imply that the leaves in question are still on the daffodil plants at the time of asking the question, hence the use of the present continuous tense in the proposition.)

Segment 2 This is expressed in the passive, so is now recast in the active imperative form. The passive construction mitigates the imperative. No scale of mitigation has been developed; here the social situation is that of an expert answering a question, but giving an answer which the expert anticipates will be somewhat unacceptable to the questioner, as segments 13–16 show. The authority structure is such that advice or helpful instructions are being given in a polite and friendly manner.

Segment 4 The gerund “cutting” is a form which does not require overt expression of the agent and patient: these are supplied in the proposition.

Segment 5 This segment is the most difficult to rewrite propositionally. The key word is “essential”; the writer is saying that there is no alternative to the period of six weeks specified in propositions 2 and 3. The strong term “essential” is almost certainly used because of the sensed reluctance of the questioner to leave the leaves for so long a period of time. (Again, see segments 13–16 and note the form of the question in 1, “How soon . . . ?”) Expressed in propositional terms, then, it is, You must leave, with prominence on must.

Segment 6 “Rebuild” represents an Event for which no agent is stated. Moreover the term is somewhat figurative, in that normal building operations are not being referred to. The meaning of “rebuild” is represented by replenish. The agent is considered to be the plant itself but this is not really clear in the text. (In fact, the term “plant” is never used.) But “plant” would be correct botanically: the bulb does not rebuild itself. The word “foodstores” is regarded as referring to a Thing, not to an Event (to store).

Segment 7 The pronoun “it” is not considered to refer back to the immediate antecedent, the bulb, but to refer again to the plant, since it is the plant that grows and flowers, not the bulb. The enquirer would readily understand this from his or her knowledge of daffodils.

Segment 10 The term “energy” is treated as a Thing concept in the proposition, but something has to have energy; in this context it is the plant again. Expressing “is not diverted” actively entails a mild personification of the plant, making it appear that it is consciously using its energy to do something, as if it were an animal or a human being. Figures of speech are not supposed to appear in propositions, but occasionally “mild” personifications are unavoidable.

Segment 11 The noun “production” represents an Event concept, produce. The patient is seeds; the plant is again considered to be the agent.

Segment 12 The connective “but” does not represent a strict contrast. The command is a secondary head, hence And is used in the proposition.

Segment 13 “Find” is used in a nonprimary sense, hence should be replaced in the proposition. “Unsightly” collocates closely with “find,” and itself needs to be replaced by a less abstract term. To find something unsightly is to dislike its appearance, but the term “appearance,” in its primary sense, means that something comes into sight or becomes visible, hence it is inappropriate here. To meet this problem, the term “look” is used intransitively. Since dislike and look are both Events, two propositions are required. “Fading” refers to an Event, which entails a separate proposition. It is better to say while they are fading than which are fading, since this latter expression could be interpreted as a limiting proposition, contrasting fading with nonfading leaves. This is not the writer’s intended meaning. Rather, the reference is (implicitly) to all the leaves during the six weeks before they are cut back, i.e., to a span of time.

Segment 14 “Try planting” is understood to be yet another mitigated imperative. The writer is not asking the enquirer to make several attempts at planting the daffodils; this low-key type of imperative is a normal way of making a suggestion. The term “daffodils” refers throughout the text to the whole plant: it is the bulb only that is to be planted beneath a shrub.

Segment 15 “Stand out against” is considered to be a nonprimary use. It means that the daffodils will be easy to see against the background of shrubs. A generic agent for see is supplied.

Segment 16 The passive “will be disguised” is recast in the proposition as an active form. The passive has the effect of topicalising “fading bulb leaves” once more, after the digression in segments 14 and 15. This topicalisation is lost in the propositional form: it can be handled elsewhere in the analysis as a referential prosody.

20

THE MEANING STRUCTURE OF A TEXT

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20.4 The theme and schematic outline of the message

Throughout Part 2 we have been studying, chapter by chapter, different elements in the structure of communicated meaning. In this chapter we bring these factors to bear on one text, the Badger text, in order to provide an analysis of its meaning structure at all levels.

The text itself is presented first with numbered segments.

1 The badger, one of Britain’s best-loved animals, has been part of our heritage for so long

2 that its traditional country name—Brock (meaning bi-coloured)—has been woven into the names of our villages and towns nationwide.

3 Yet badgers are in danger.

4 And these harmless creatures have only one predator.

5 Man.

6 Despite laws designed to protect them,

7 an estimated 10,000 badgers a year are brutally killed by illegal badger digging.

8 Loop-holes in the law mean that

9 although the animals are protected,

10 their underground homes are not.

11 The League has launched an urgent campaign, through Parliament,

12 to tighten up the laws.

13 We need to ensure that

14 anyone caught digging at a badger sett is committing an offence.

15 If you’d like to help the badgers—

16 please fill in the coupon

17 and help us to win this vital campaign.

18 You will receive a special information pack

19 outlining ways in which you can help.

20 Your donation—whatever you can spare—will be gratefully received

21 and carefully used on the badgers’ behalf.

22 And we’ll be glad to send you our special enamel badge for donations over £10.00 as a thank you for your concern.

20.1 The message as a unit

Features characteristic of the message as a whole are handled as different kinds of prosodies (sections 20.1.1–20.1.3). The content of the message is discussed in terms of its topic (section 20.1.4). The purposive thrust of the message is presented in the form of a summary (section 20.1.5), detailed discussion of the theme being postponed until after the relational analysis has been completed.

20.1.1 The situational prosodies of the message

The message constitutes the major element in an advertisement appearing in a magazine about wildlife. Its immediate situational framework, therefore, is the rest of the advertisement, which consists of a drawing of a badger, and a coupon to be filled in. Further framework is provided by surrounding advertisements and by the magazine itself.

The immediate situational context of the writer is unknown: the message is presented as from a League, not from an individual. The readers of the magazine are addressed directly. The message is contemporary, drawing attention to a present problem and its hoped-for resolution in the relatively near future.

The sociocultural context assumed in the message is that of a nation with a long history, a system of laws, and a legislative body. There is also a tradition of personal involvement in public matters. The message is directed towards a social class with leisure to pursue personal interests and adequate finances to support shared goals. In the subculture represented by the magazine, a high value is attached to animals.

20.1.2 The referential prosodies of the message

Of the referential concepts that occur in the message, those of badgers, the law, the League, and you are the most extensive. These all belong to the real world of the anonymous writer and the readers, hence the message is not fictional, and the milieu of the message content is the same as the sociocultural context of the message as a whole.

The characteristic relations of the message are causal and purposive: the dangers facing badgers are traced to their source, a course of action is proposed, and help is requested in its implementation.

20.1.3 The person-related prosodies of the message

The message-sender is the League: the only first person references are in the plural, and relate to the League as an official body. (For the only exception to this, see section 20.2.1.1.) The viewpoint of the message, therefore, is not personal, but neutral; personal characteristics of the writer and recipients are irrelevant.

Attitudinal and evaluative prosodies, however, pervade the message. Attitudinal prosodies occur strongly in the first major unit; evaluative prosodies are found throughout. These prosodic elements provide important evidence in the structural and purposive analysis of the message. They will be discussed in detail in the appropriate sections of the analysis, as will some other person-related prosodies and special prominence.

20.1.4 The topic of the message

The only concept in the message with a realistic claim to topicality is the badger concept. It occurs in the prominent initial position in segment 1, and is realised overtly in half the surface-structure segments. It is also conceptually present, although unrealised, at various other points: the campaign is a campaign to protect badgers; the concern (of the readers who send donations) is a concern for badgers.

It would be misleading, however, to posit badgers (in general) as the topic of the message. Once the fact that badgers are in danger has been mentioned in 3, it is never thereafter lost sight of, as is evidenced by the details given in 7, the description of the campaign (11–14), and the use of terms such as “protect” (6), “help” (15) and “concern” (22). Thus the major load-bearing element referentially is not simply badgers, but badgers-in-danger, and this more complex and emotive concept is also pivotal in the schema. It is because badgers are in danger that the law needs to be changed, and a campaign is launched to bring this about. The topic badgers-in-danger acquires increasing detail as the message progresses: see section 14.5.2 for an earlier discussion of badger as a developing topic.

20.1.5 The import and theme of the message

The import of the message is volitional. Its purpose is to persuade the readers of BBC Wildlife to give money to the League in support of their campaign to have badgers better protected legally. Since a certain reluctance to part with money is to be anticipated, the message takes the form of a contested volitional.

Detailed discussion of the theme is postponed until section 20.4, at which point the relational patterns of the message and the themes of the three main configurations are available as evidence. A summary can, however, be tentatively provided at this stage, by eliminating all non-prominent material and all non-essential concepts: Badgers are in danger. The laws protecting them are ineffective, therefore we aim to have them changed. Give us money (to help achieve this). The three parts of the summary correspond to the three major configurations to be discussed in section 20.2. The briefest possible summary would be Give us money to help us protect badgers.

20.2 The units and schema relations of the message

The message is divided into three major configurations, each having a different import, referential content, and schematic role. Each major configuration can be further subdivided, on schematic and referential grounds.

The first major configuration (1–5) has expressive import. Its topic is badgers-in-danger, and its schematic role is to arouse interest and sympathy. The second major configuration (6–14) has factual import with evaluative overlay. Its topic is loop-holes in the law, and its schematic role is to validate the League’s campaign. The third major configuration (15–22) has volitional import. Its topic is give money, and its schematic role is that of proposed action.

It should be noted that the natural order of the purposive chain—factual, expressive, volitional—is changed in this message, the expressive configuration coming first. This is done in order to attract attention and engage the emotions at the start: facts come later.

20.2.1 The first configuration (expressive) (1–5)

(1) The badger, one of Britain’s best-loved animals, has been part of our heritage for so long

(2) that its traditional country name—Brock (meaning bi-coloured)—has been woven into the names of our villages and towns nationwide.

(3) Yet badgers are in danger.

(4) And these harmless creatures have only one predator.

(5) Man.

20.2.1.1 The referential content and topic of configuration 1–5

The dominant concept in this configuration is that of badgers, already discussed as the message topic in 20.1.4. It is realised by nouns in 1 and 3, by a pronoun in 2, generically in 1 (“one of Britain’s best-loved animals”), and also by synonyms (“Brock” in 2 and “these harmless creatures” in 4). It thus provides a steadily maintained conceptual core to which other concepts relate, i.e., it functions as the topic. The concept of danger attaches to it in 3, and thereafter the topic is badgers-in-danger.

Other recurring concept areas are those of nation (including references to “Britain,” “heritage,” “traditional name,” “our villages and towns”) and danger (including the reference to “predator,” identified in 5 as “man”).

One further concept requires discussion, that signalled by “our” in segments 1 and 2 (“our heritage,” “our villages”). Is the intended reference exclusive (to the League only), or inclusive (including the readers and possibly others)? After segment 2, first person plural forms do not occur again until segment 13, where the reference is to the League only. But this is in a very different context, with respect to both content and import. In the first configuration the purpose is to arouse the interest and sympathy of the readers. The term “our” is therefore used inclusively in 1 and 2 to increase the readers’ sense of emotional involvement with the badgers and solidarity with the League.

20.2.1.2 The import, schema role, and theme of configuration 1–5

The import of configuration 1–5 is expressive, of the emotive type: the writer’s purpose is to arouse the reader’s emotions. Evidence for this is to be found in the generous use of special prominence, to an extent unequalled in the rest of the text. Inherently emotive words occur throughout, positive ones in 1 and 2 (“heritage,” “traditional,” “country,” “Brock”), and negative ones in 3–5 (“danger,” “predator”). Several superlative terms are used (“best-loved”(1), “nationwide”(2), “only one”(4)). There are also two figures of speech, otherwise rare in the text: the metaphor of weaving in segment 2, and the identification of “man” in 5 with the “predator” of 4. The latter figure of speech might be considered as personification in reverse—not the humanising of an animal or idea, but the “animalising” of man. The unexpectedness of the identification (the use of “predator” makes the reader expect mention of an animal) adds to its emotive force, as does the departure from norms of the one-word sentence (5) which realises it. A further departure from norms, this time from lexical norms, is found in the reversal of the normal order of “towns and villages,” so that the more appealing term “villages” comes first.

A further indication of expressive import is found in the fact that the concept area of nation, prominent in 1 and 2, does not occur thereafter: it is completely irrelevant to the purpose of the message as a whole. The only possible reason for its inclusion is to act as a vehicle for the positive emotive prosodies already mentioned, a vehicle sure of ready acceptance with this particular audience, but unnecessary once the reader’s sympathies are engaged.

In view of the strongly expressive import, the schema role of the unit must lie in the area of arousing the reader’s emotions. This is in any case appropriate to a contested volitional message, since a reluctant addressee needs to have his emotions won over as well as his reason. It is particularly appropriate in this instance that the emotive appeal is at the beginning of the message, since it is only too easy for a reader of the magazine to cast his eye briefly over the advertisements and then turn the page. It is to prevent this, as well as to disarm reluctance, that the message begins with an expressive unit. The drawing of a badger that accompanies the text provides visual prominence with the same purpose. The schema role of 1–5 is, therefore, to arouse interest and emotion.

The theme of configuration 1–5 is: How distressing it is that such well-loved creatures as badgers are in danger—and from man! The construction “How . . .” followed by an exclamation is employed to reflect the emotive nature of the unit. The theme reflects the positive attitude to badgers in segments 1 and 2, and the surprise accusation of man as the predator in segment 5, since these are both prominent, and essential to the schematic role of the configuration. Had the theme been based solely on the referential content of the unit, it would been much briefer: Badgers are in danger from man. But this falls short of conveying the writer’s purpose, which is inherently expressive. If it is considered important to distinguish referential from emotive material, the latter may be enclosed in parentheses to indicate the difference in source: (How distressing it is that) (such well-loved creatures as) badgers are in danger (—and) from man (!).

20.2.1.3 The internal structure of configuration 1–5

Configuration 1–5 consists of two smaller configurations, which contrast with each other in several respects.

Configuration 1–2 is characterised by positive prosodies throughout. Its topic is badgers, referred to, however, generically: it seems that positive emotions attach more readily to the species than to individual animals. (The surface-structure singular form is replaced by the plural in the topic, as the concept concerned relates to many animals, not to one only.) Sentence length is significant: segments 1 and 2 consist of one long sentence—the longest in the text—which builds up attractive ideas cumulatively, drawing the reader on without any obvious break point.

Configuration 3–5 begins with the contrastive “yet,” and is characterised by negative prosodies. Its topic is badgers-in-danger, and badgers are now referred to in the plural, presumably to hint at their individual danger. They are described as “harmless” to contrast their plight with their deserts. Configuration 3–5 consists of the three shortest sentences in the text. The final position in each is filled by the new, important concept: danger, predator, man. The brevity of the sentences brings these concepts into close proximity like so many hammer blows, giving the negative prosody special prominence. The unit is also given special prominence visually: segments 3–5 are underlined. This is the emotional high point of the message; after this, emotion is maintained, but little generated.

In view of the foregoing evidence, it is obvious that these two units make different purposive contributions, i.e., have different schema roles. The role of configuration 1–2 is to establish favourable emotions; the role of configuration 3–5 is to arouse indignation.

Since configurations 1–2 and 3–5 differ from each other both referentially and in their purposive contribution, the question may be raised as to whether they should be united in one larger configuration (1–5) at all. (Similar considerations would apply to configurations 6–10 and 11–14, which were combined in 20.2 as the major configuration 6–14.)

In fact, there is nothing at all strange in smaller units being combined to form larger ones: this is essential in the analysis of longer texts. The larger units define the broad sweep of the writer’s developing purpose: the smaller units fill in that purpose with content and detail. What is unusual in this text is that the smaller units have schema roles of their own, instead of being joined only by referential or associative relations. The fact that quite small units here carry schema roles indicates that the writer is using the limited space available to great effect: each sentence or short sentence grouping makes a different contribution towards the goal of inducing the reader to give. But it would obscure the thrust of the message to divide it into a multiplicity of small configurations. The development from emotions (1–5) to facts (6–14) to appeal (15–22) is deliberate and effective, and must be reflected in the structural analysis.

20.2.1.4 The final boundary of configuration 1–5

The final boundary of configuration 1–5, so far assumed to fall at the end of segment 5, requires justification. (The initial boundary in this instance requires no further discussion, since it coincides with the beginning of the message.)

It could be argued that the configuration beginning at segment 3 continues until segment 10, since the concept badgers-in-danger occurs frequently in segments 3–10, but only occasionally subsequently. Moreover, the generic claim that man is a predator (5) is supported by the specific details given in segment 7, thus indicating a close relation between them. Undoubtedly, these two factors tend to blur the boundary between 5 and 6, but are they sufficient to cancel it out?

Concerning the repeated realisation in surface-structure of the concept badgers-in-danger, it should be borne in mind that this is not in itself sufficient evidence to establish a single unit (segments 3–10). This concept is, after all, the topical concept of the whole message, and is to be expected throughout. Boundaries may rather be established in terms of other concepts of more localised occurrence. The existence of such a boundary at the point where the localised topic inadequate laws is introduced (segment 6) is confirmed by the fact that, from this point on, the badgers-in-danger concept is much less prominent, indicating a significant difference in function. In segments 6–10 it is realised overtly five times, but grammatically only one of these five occurrences carries any prominence: “an estimated 10,000 badgers” (7) occurs in subject position in a main clause (though not sentence initial). The other four occasions are either in a subordinate clause (“the animals,” segment 9) or have a peripheral function in their clause or phrase (“by . . . badger digging,” segment 7) or are both subordinated and peripheral (“them,” segment 6 and “their,” segment 10). Grammatically, the focus of attention has moved elsewhere.

A similar factor of prominence comes into play in connection with the relation between man as predator (4–5) and the details given in segment 7. The prominence given in the latter to the killing of badgers is considerable, but it is presented only after attention has been diverted to “laws,” which, by the use of the connective “despite,” are already hinted at as inadequate. The wholesale slaughter of badgers is presented, not as a problem in itself (as in 4–5), but as an example of the inadequacy of existing legislation. The same referential material has undergone a role shift—an adequate justification for a boundary.

Positive justification for a boundary between 5 and 6 is visual, referential and purposive. Visually, the ending of underlining at the end of 5 signals a change from emotive to factual material. Referentially, as we have seen, badgers become less prominent after 6, where a new topic, laws, is established. Purposively, the expressive import of 1–5 terminates abruptly at 5. From segment 6 onwards, both vocabulary and style are uncompromisingly factual. It is the marked contrast between expressive and factual imports that provides the main justification for terminating the first major configuration at 5: the writer has achieved one purpose and turns to another.

Since the boundary between 5 and 6 is thus clearly marked, why is it simultaneously blurred by the prominent occurrence of the badgers-in-danger concept in segment 7? It must be assumed, in a message so carefully structured, that this is deliberate. A clue to the answer is found at the beginning of 6, where the new topic, (inadequate) laws, is introduced. An appeal for funds to support a campaign must inevitably mention the purpose of the campaign, in this instance to tighten up inadequate laws. But this in itself has little appeal to the reader; laws do not grip the imagination as a popular topic. The essential facts are therefore presented more acceptably to the reader by being interwoven with the emotive concept of badgers-in-danger that is already established.

20.2.2 The second configuration (factual/evaluative) (6–14)

(6) Despite laws designed to protect them,

(7) an estimated 10,000 badgers a year are brutally killed by illegal badger digging.

(8) Loop-holes in the law mean that

(9) although the animals are protected,

(10) their underground homes are not.

(11) The League has launched an urgent campaign, through Parliament,

(12) to tighten up the laws.

(13) We need to ensure that

(14) anyone caught digging at a badger sett is committing an offence.

20.2.2.1 The referential content and topic of configuration 6–14

Concepts that recur throughout this unit are laws and badgers. The decreasing prominence on badgers has already been noted (20.2.1.4). Concepts that occur from 11 onwards are League and campaign, but these are introduced specifically in the context of laws and of changing the law. The concept laws, then, is the main contender for topicality in this configuration, and it is in this form (“laws”) that it is introduced in segment 6. However, even here it is clear that laws in general are not in focus; rather the topic is the specific laws that are designed to protect badgers, but fail to do so. It is these inadequate laws that are conceptually foregrounded throughout—failing in their design in 6, broken in 7, having loop-holes in 8, failing again in 10, needing to be made more effective in 12. Although segments 13 and 14 do not overtly mention inadequate laws, segment 14 in fact provides the specific of the generic loop-hole mentioned in 10, that badgers’ underground homes are not protected by law. In 14 it becomes clear that under existing legislation it is possible for people to dig up, or dig in the vicinity of, badger setts, with complete impunity. Killing badgers is illegal, but the manifest intention of doing so is not an offence in law. Hence inadequate laws is the topic right through to the end of the unit.

20.2.2.2 The import, schema role, and theme of configuration 6–14

The import of configuration 6—14 is predominantly factual: 10,000 badgers a year are killed, their setts are without legal protection. Nevertheless, there is an evaluative prosody overlaid on the facts throughout. A negative prosody attaches to the present law: it has loop-holes (8) and needs tightening up (12). A positive prosody attaches to badgers (their setts are called “underground homes” in 10) and a corresponding negative one to their endangered state (they are “brutally” killed, badger digging is “illegal” (segment 7)). The very fact that the laws are inadequate, which constitutes the topic of the configuration, is in itself an evaluation of the laws concerned. Why, then, is this configuration analysed as factual rather than evaluative in import?

It is often difficult, sometimes impossible, to draw a precise boundary between factual and evaluative imports: a totally objective presentation of facts is rare. In this instance, however, the evidence is that the anonymous writer wishes to sound objective. The numerical facts in 7, the use of legal terminology (“illegal,” “loop-holes in the law,” “protect,” “committing an offence”) and the predominance of causal relations throughout (see 20.3.2) all indicate that the writer wishes to convey a sober impression of the League. This is confirmed by the absence of special prominence, and by the measured sentence structure: all have two or three clauses and are of similar length, contrasting noticeably with those in the first configuration. We conclude, therefore, that the writer’s purpose was to present the law’s failure to protect badgers as a fact that needed to be changed, rather than an evaluation which would be open to challenge and argument.

The purpose of this configuration is to show why the campaign, mentioned for the first time in segment 11, is necessary. Its schema role is therefore that of validating the League’s campaign. Purposively, it provides a bridge between the arousal of interest in the first configuration, and the appeal for funds in the third. Emotively, it provides the reader with a respite after the heightened feelings of the first configuration, before the emotions are again engaged, though in a different way, in the last configuration.

The theme of the configuration, based on its prominent content, may be stated as follows: The laws protecting badgers are inadequate, therefore they should be changed. The introduction of some non-topical concepts would make possible an expanded version: The laws protecting badgers are inadequate, therefore (we (the League) have begun a campaign so that) they should be changed. The expanded version has the advantage that it provides a more natural transition to the third configuration. It is based not on prominence alone, but also on the purposive role of configuration 6–14 within the total message.

20.2.2.3 The internal structure of configuration 6–14

Configuration 6–14 consists of two smaller configurations, 6–10 and 11–14. The boundary between them is signalled by the introduction of three new concepts in 11: the League, campaign, and Parliament. None of these recur with sufficient frequency to displace the existing topic of inadequate laws, but they do indicate a fresh development within that topic, from the inadequacy of the existing laws to the kind of change needed. Hence the concept of campaign, which has the purpose of bringing about that change, might be considered a subtopic: fresh concepts such as digging in 14 attach to inadequate laws as their conceptual base, but indirectly to campaign also. Other referential concepts also relate the two smaller units quite closely. Tightening up the laws (12) relates back to the various signals of legal inadequacy—“despite”(6), “illegal”(7), “loop-holes”(8). The new law envisaged in 14 corresponds to the failure of the existing law described in 10.

Despite these close topical and referential ties, it is important to maintain a degree of relative independence between the two units on the basis of their differing prosodic emphases. Between segments 10 and 11 there is an abrupt switch in prosodic focus from the badgers to the campaign. Badgers are now presented with detachment: their “homes” are now “setts,” and killing them is not a brutality, but an offence. The campaign, although mentioned only once, carries a positive prosody due the use of metaphor (“launched”) and of the adjective “urgent.”

The major configuration 6–14 can therefore be seen as carrying forward the purpose of the message simultaneously at the level of reason (the laws are inadequate) and of feeling (badgers are in danger and the campaign is urgent). It is the prosodic switch from the badgers to the campaign which indicates the pivotal nature of this unit; 6–10 belongs prosodically to the first major configuration, and 11–14 to the third.

20.2.2.4 The boundaries of configuration 6–14

The initial boundary of the configuration, between segments 5 and 6, has been discussed in 20.2.1.4. The final boundary, at segment 14, is justified by the change of import to volitional at segment 15, by the conceptual backgrounding of laws and campaign from 15 onwards, and by the introduction of new topical concepts to be discussed in section 20.2.3.4.

20.2.3 The third configuration (volitional) (15–22)

(15) If you’d like to help the badgers—

(16) please fill in the coupon

(17) and help us to win this vital campaign.

(18) You will receive a special information pack

(19) outlining ways in which you can help.

(20) Your donation—whatever you can spare—will be gratefully received

(21) and carefully used on the badgers’ behalf.

(22) And we’ll be glad to send you our special enamel badge for donations over £10.00 as a thank you for your concern.

20.2.3.1 The referential content and topic of configuration 15–22

Referentially, the message changes almost completely at segment 15. Concepts previously foregrounded now disappear entirely (laws are not mentioned) or retire into the background: the League is mentioned only by pronominal references in the last segment, and even badgers are mentioned only twice (15 and 21), completely non-emotively.

The concepts that now move into the foreground are you and help/give (money). The concept you has not previously appeared in the message (except by implication as part of “our” in 1 and 2), yet in this configuration it occurs either overtly or as part of the relational framework in every segment. The searchlight has suddenly swung round upon the reader, and stays there until the end of the message. Moreover, the reader thus in the limelight is singular, an individual, as is evidenced, in spite of the ambiguity of the English pronoun, by the singular “donation” in 20. After the secure anonymity of the first two configurations, the reader now finds himself targeted, the cover of badgers and law and League stripped away.

The other new concept in this unit is that of help/give (money). The reader is being asked to contribute financially to the campaign. But this is introduced gently, generically: “help the badgers”(15), “help us to win”(17), “ways . . . you can help”(19). Money is not yet mentioned. Indeed, the only concrete response initially required is to “fill in the coupon”(16)—surely a commonplace and entirely non-threatening request. Gradually in the course of the unit the request becomes less generic, more overt: “your donation”(20) implies money for the first time. Only in the final segment is money specifically mentioned: “donations over £10” not only mentions money, but implies an acceptable lower limit to the amount given.

The most immediate candidate as topic of unit 15–22 is the you concept. But in spite of its pervasiveness, this seems forced and unsatisfactory: the writer is not talking about the readers, but to them. The remaining possibility is the Event concept help/give. Although topics are normally Things, the fact that they “carry the schema relations” (14.2) means that it is quite possible for the topic to be an Event. Indeed, in volitional messages, in which someone is being urged or exhorted to do something, it is only to be expected that the topic should be the desired or intended Event: it is not only being talked about (hence it is referentially prominent) but fulfils the head schematic role of the message, the proposed action. Hence the topic in configuration 15–22 is help/give (money). The concept money has to be included in the topic, since the relational framework of give is incomplete without it.

20.2.3.2 The import, schema role, and theme of configuration 15–22

The import of configuration 15–22 is volitional. The writer, who in the first configuration addressed the emotions, and in the second configuration the reason, now focuses solely on the will of the readers. This is done with considerable subtlety. The imperatives “fill in” and “help” in segments 16 and 17, already mitigated by their indirectness, are further buffered by the introductory conditional in 15, “if you’d like to help the badgers”—so much more acceptable than its unspoken counterpart if you are willing to contribute financially. The direct references to donations in segments 20 and 22 are presented with indirect surface syntax: an abstract noun is less confrontational than an imperative verb, and can occur in peripheral syntactic positions, as it does in 22. Moreover, donations are not overtly requested: they “will be gratefully received”(20) and “carefully used”(21). The giving that necessarily precedes reception and use is downplayed and provided with positive associated concepts. Throughout the unit the person-related prosody of mitigation accompanies the help/give concept, and the prosody of enhancement accompanies all references to the campaign and to the outcome of giving a donation.

The abundance of positive signals in this unit merits further comment. The other two major configurations balance positive and negative subunits: only in this final configuration is negativity absent. The act of giving is lexicalised as “help”(15, 17, 19) and (by implication) “concern”(22). The campaign is described as “vital”(17) and its associated information pack and badge as “special”(18, 22). If the readers are to be induced to give, then no discordant note must be struck.

The sender-related prosody of degree of certainty should also be noted—not certainty with respect to facts, but rather over-certainty with respect to the anticipated giving. A tacit conditionality applies to all the promises in 18–22: if no donation is sent there will be no information pack, no badge, no gratitude or careful use. Yet this underlying condition is never mentioned overtly. The reader’s co-operation is assumed, and the message ends with an expression of thanks.

The schema role of this configuration can thus be seen as essentially one of motivation to action, the action of giving, with the appeal (“Please fill in the coupon”) in 16 constituting the head element.

The theme of the configuration is give us money (derived from the head element (16) and the later references to donations). In order to bring out more clearly the positive prosodies and the relationship of this unit to those preceding, the purpose of giving can also be included in the theme: please give us money in order that we may win our vital campaign to help the badgers.

20.2.3.3 The internal structure of configuration 15–22

Unlike the earlier units, configuration 15–22 shows no clear internal changes in referential content. You and help/give are found throughout. New concepts such as coupon, information pack, and enamel badge occur only once each, and do not signal new subunits.

But although referentially homogeneous, the unit consists of several smaller units schematically. The most prominent of these is 15–17, presenting the Proposed Action.

The smaller units that follow it consist of a series of promises that each bring a different pressure to bear on the reader. Segments 18 and 19, offering a special information pack, constitute a Persuasion: the reader who responds as requested will receive something. Segments 20 and 21 fulfil a double schematic role: the reader is reassured that no one need give more than they can spare and the League is vindicated as a responsible body, grateful for gifts and careful in using them. Segment 22 constitutes a further Persuasion to give, and specifically to give more than £10.00. So for the reader, suddenly addressed in segment 15, the gradually intensifying request is cushioned by a steady flow of persuasion, vindication and reassurance.

20.2.3.4 The boundaries of configuration 15–22

The initial boundary of configuration 15–22 is justified referentially by the absence of previous concepts and the introduction of new ones (see 20.2.3.1). It is justified purposively by the change from factual/evaluative to volitional import.

The final boundary, at 22, can hardly be disputed, since this is the end of the message, and the concept you and the topic-concept help/give (money) continue right through to the final phrases.

20.3 The propositions and referential relations of the message

20.3.1 The expressive configuration (1–5)

The display of propositions and relations is presented first, followed by comments on difficult points, segment by segment. This configuration contains frequent emotive prosodies, positive at the beginning of the unit and negative at the end. The concepts to which these prosodies relate are marked by an asterisk, indicating the presence at that point of significant prosodic material that does not appear in the proposition since it is not referential. The characteristic relations of this configuration, except at the highest level, are associative.

1a badgers have lived in Britain for a

very long time\*

1b British people love badgers very

much

2a in the countryside badgers have been

called “Brock” for a very long time\*

2b “Brock” means that (Badgers) are

two-coloured animals

2c the name “Brock” is part\* of the

name of villages and towns\* throughout

Britain\*

3 badgers are in danger\*

4 badgers\* are preyed on by only one

kind of predator

5 (badgers are preyed on only by) human

beings\*

Segment 1

Since the reference is to a large number of badgers, the singular form “the badger” has been replaced by the plural. “Best-loved” is considered to be intensive (loved very much) not superlative (loved more than other animals). No comparison is intended: the purpose is emotive. “Heritage” is also considered to be primarily emotive. “our heritage” means that the heritage belongs to writer and readers alike: the pronoun is inclusive. Both here and in 2c the inclusive pronoun is used as part of the positive prosody that permeates segments 1 and 2, hence no counterpart appears in the proposition. The Event love (“best-loved animals”) has an agent in its relational framework. British people is supplied from the immediate context.

Segment 2

“Traditional country name” realises referential concepts a very long time, people living in the country, to call/name. In addition to the reference to a very long time, “traditional” carries a positive prosody. Since the country dwellers who originally used the name “Brock” for badgers are not in focus, the Event call/name is put in the passive form in the proposition, to avoid the unnecessary introduction of participants who would not be mentioned again.

The metaphor of “woven into” is restated referentially.

“Villages and towns” carry a positive prosody signalled by “our” (inclusive).

“Nationwide” realises throughout Britain. It is not strictly true that “Brock” occurs in place names in all parts of the country, but the writer is exaggerating with emotive purpose.

Relationally, Segment 2 is the result of the reason given in Segment 1: “Brock” occurs widely in place names because badgers have lived in Britain for a very long time. In factual messages, results are usually more prominent than reasons, but in this expressive configuration the normal prominence pattern is reversed. Such prominence reversal is common in expressive messages.

Segment 3

“Yet” is not represented in proposition 3 because it is the surface-structure realisation of the high-level relation of concession-contraexpectation between configurations 1–2 and 3–5. Segment 3 has a high degree of prominence, signalled by “yet,” the switch from singular “badger” to plural “badgers,” the sudden introduction of a negative attitudinal prosody (“in danger”), and the short, sharp sentence structure following the one long sentence in 1–2.

Segment 4

“And” does not realise an additive relation, but is a prominence device presaging a significant amplification.

“These harmless creatures” is an emotive synonym for “badgers.” “Harmless” contrasts with the element of harm conveyed by the word “predator.” However, contrast is usually carried by the relation between two propositions: a contrast internal to one proposition is normally conveyed only lexically. Here, however, the writer avoids a straight lexical contrast. It seems best, therefore, to consider “harmless” as realising a positive prosody rather than a contrast. The writer is not making a formal claim that badgers do no damage, but is once more presenting them in a positive light.

The passive is maintained in the proposition in order to preserve the topicality of badgers.

Predator is appropriate for use as a concept label, since the term is used in its primary and literal sense. However, it clearly refers to predators as a class rather than to an individual predator, hence the singular form is preceded by the generic kind of.

Segment 5

“Man,” as is indicated by the direct line from the left with capitalised relational labels, realises the most prominent proposition in the configuration. This prominence is conveyed by the unusual and truncated sentence structure, and by the conceptual clash between “predator” and “man”: see section 20.2.1.2.

20.3.2 The factual/evaluative configuration (6–14)

The purpose of this configuration is to present facts concerning the number of badgers killed, the failure of the law to protect them, and the campaign initiated by the League to change the law. The characteristic relations of this unit are causal (e.g. reason-result, means-purpose). Emotive prosodies occur but much less frequently.

6a (Parliament) has passed laws

6b in order that (no person) should kill

badgers

7a (people) are digging up badgers/setts

7b they (people, 7a) are brutally and

illegally killing about 10,000 badgers each

year

8 (Parliament) did not state the laws

exactly enough (to stop people harming

badgers)

9 these laws say: do not kill badgers

10 these laws do not say: do not dig up

badger setts\*

11 we, the League, have begun a

campaign\* through Parliament

12 (in order that) (Parliament) should

make the laws exact enough

13 we (excl) (the League) need to ensure

that (the laws should state exactly):

14a if any\* person is digging at (a place

where there is) a badger sett

14b when (the police) catch that

person

14c then that person (can be charged

with) committing an offence.

Segment 6

“Designed” means (drawn up and) passed with a specific purpose. This is an Event, for which the only possible agent, Parliament, is supplied. Relational labels such as purpose are not normally included within propositions, but here in order that is included in 6b as being part of the conceptual content of “designed.”

“Protect” is not used here in its primary sense of providing physical guard for. The law was designed, not to cause people to stand guard over badgers, but to make it illegal to kill them.

Segment 7

The exact meaning of “illegal” here is unclear, since it appears from 8--10 and 14 that digging up badger setts is not illegal: the whole point of the campaign is to make it so. Probably the idea of illegality is intended to apply rather to “brutally killed,” hence its inclusion in 7b.

Segment 8

“Loop-holes in the law” is a dead metaphor; it is figurative but not emotive.

Although reasons have less natural prominence than results, configuration 8–10 is here given equal prominence with 6–7, as signified by the (capitalised) label reason. This is because configuration 8–10 is of pivotal importance in the development of the message, providing an explanation for the continuing carnage of 7, and presenting the problem that 11–14 is intended to resolve.

Segment 9

“Although” is here taken to introduce not a concession, but a contrast. A concession is normally followed by something unexpected, and 10 is not unexpected here, since the concept not protected has been already introduced in 6, and the inadequacy of the law has been referred to in 6 and 8. The main thrust of 9 and 10 is to highlight the contrast between the protected animals and their unprotected setts.

As in 6, “protect” is here considered to mean legal and not physical protection.

Segment 10

“Underground homes” carries a positive emotive prosody: badger setts is used in the proposition as being more strictly referential.

The contrast between 9 and 10 is highlighted by the omission of “protected” in 10, thus leaving “not” in the prominent sentence-final position.

Segment 11

“Through Parliament” is an unusual collocation. The preposition “through” is probably used because the League has no official status in Parliament; it needs to employ the indirect tactics of lobbying and public pressure to being about the desired legal changes, which only Parliament can make. The phrase may also imply that some members of Parliament favour these changes: certainly the reference to Parliament here is intended to reassure the addressees concerning the effectiveness of the campaign.

Segment 14

The special prominence on any, indicated by italics in the text, is meant to lead the mind on to the way the legal loophole was being exploited. Hence a fuller propositionalisation could be:

14a if any\* person is digging . . . at a badger sett,

14b even if that person has not yet/actually killed a badger.

“Caught” realises an Event concept: the problem is to relate caught and digging: which is the condition and which is the circumstance? If caught is made the condition (as in, If (the police) catch any person when that person is digging . . .) a wrong meaning is communicated, that the legal offence was that of being caught. The solution chosen here is to make caught the circumstance.

20.3.3 The volitional configuration (15–22)

This configuration is schematically the most prominent part of the message: everything else has been building up to the appeal for money. Referentially, however, it is singularly bland. Apart from two references to “badgers” (15 and 21), the appeal is indistinguishable from thousands of others. The entire emphasis is on giving money and on the consequences of such giving, involving considerable repetition and little new referential content—a standard technique in appeals. The referentially redundant material acts primarily as a syntactic scaffolding for persuasive jargon.

There is a general, euphemistic cast to the whole appeal (see section 20.2.3.2). Surface-structure realisations of this positive prosody are indicated in the normal way by an asterisk, but there is a considerable difference between the value of the asterisk in this configuration and in the expressive configuration (1–5). In the expressive configuration, both positive and negative prosodies were attention-catching and emotive; in this configuration standard positive terms such as “vital” and “special” are used, but in predictable collocations, hence are reassuring and soothing rather than arresting.

15 if you would like to help the badgers

16 please fill in the coupon

17 you will help us to win this campaign\*

18a you will receive from us a pack\*

18b (the pack) informs you (about the

campaign)

19 (the pack) tells you briefly: you can help by

doing certain things

20a we will gratefully receive the money you

give

20b even if the money is a small amount\*

21 we will carefully use the money you give on

the badgers’ behalf

22a we will send\* you the enamel badge

associated with the League

22b if you give (to the League) more money than

£10.00

22c in order that we show you:

22d we are grateful to you

22e you were concerned (about

badgers-in-danger)

Segment 15

The concept you is to be understood as singular throughout this unit (see section 20.2.3.1).

Segment 16

Segment 16 stands in the relation of consequence to the condition (15) and in the relation of means to the purpose (17). The label head is used as an alternative to consequence/means, and indicates its relative prominence with respect to 15 and 17.

Since the filling in of the coupon constituted a commitment to a donation, “fill in the coupon” could be propositionalised as send us money on the principle of interpreting as far along the purposive chain as is appropriate in the circumstances. This is not done here because the use of “coupon” was undoubtedly deliberate and was intended to block or postpone the triggering of the concept money. What the writer meant, and what the reader was intended to understand, diverge somewhat at this point.

Note that the configuration 15–17, with 16 as its head, is analysed as being the condition of the various consequences listed in the configurations that follow. The condition is not stated overtly (“If you comply/fill in the coupon/ send us money”) but is nevertheless present relationally. The reader who sends no money will not expect to receive an information pack or a badge: these are not promised unconditionally, but are understood to be offered only to those who respond with a donation. Since conditions have less natural prominence than their consequences, the referential analysis given in the propositional display differs with respect to prominence from the schema analysis, in which segment 16, being the appeal, is schematically the most prominent element (see 20.4 and 20.2.3.2).

Segments 18–19

Segments 18b and 19 are both descriptions of “pack.” These descriptions could relate to each other either as generic-specific, or additively (19 being a virtual restatement of 18b). It is possible that the pack contains a variety of information (e.g. about badgers, or the cost of the campaign) in which case the ways of helping mentioned in 19 are a specific example of the informative content (i.e. part, but not all of it). If, however, the pack contains nothing except various suggestions for helping, 19 is a restatement of 18b. But we do not know what the pack contains, and this is not in focus. So a simple additive relation is indicated in the display, in accordance with the principle of not supplying implied information without textual or contextual justification. (Cf. 19.5, convention 7.)

Segments 20–21

The prominence of “donation” in initial position is lost when it is treated referentially as an Event, and the passive is restated actively, but it is preserved in the topic and theme of the unit (see 20.2.3.1 and 20.2.3.2).

“Whatever you can spare” is not meant literally (Subtract expenditures from income and give us the difference). It is a stock appeal phrase, a politeness formula, and as such could be replaced by an asterisk after “money” in 20a. But it may have some referential meaning, possibly the amount is irrelevant provided you give something or as much as you can afford. The referential meaning selected here as most likely (even if the money is a small amount) derives from the assumed purpose of the interpolation, to encourage addressees that even small gifts are better than none at all.

Segment 22

The final word left with the addressee is “concern.” Concern is a cognitive Attribute and requires a content: it is impossible to be concerned about nothing in particular. Here the reference is almost certainly intended as a retrospective hint, a subtle reminder of the plight of the badgers: since this is the topic for the entire message it is appropriately included here as the unstated but significant cause of the concern.

Strictly speaking, the League would not be grateful because of the feeling of concern, but because of its result in the form of a donation. This could be captured in propositional form as: means—you were (sufficiently) concerned (about badgers-in danger)—result—you sent us money. However, propositions are meant to capture, not necessarily the strict truth, but the intended meaning of the writer, which may be different. The writer probably intended here, as throughout the configuration, to avoid direct reference to giving as much as possible, but nevertheless to communicate the concept of giving by hints and assumptions. “Concern” in 22e is taken as such a hint, but not a sufficiently strong hint to justify the inclusion of the concept money in the proposition.

20.4 The theme and schematic outline of the message

Having studied each configuration in turn, we are now in a position to establish the theme of the message as a whole. The detailed, word-by-word approach employed in chapter 15 is inappropriate in longer messages: the prominent schematic material discussed there with respect to short messages is already available for us in the form of the themes of the three major configurations, as established in 20.2. And although themes are of necessity expressed in words, it is important to remember that they are conceptual, not verbal, entities: they exist in the mind at a fairly high level of abstraction, the level at which the writer plans, and the reader reconstructs, the development of the message.

Schematically, the head element in a volitional message is the appeal, the part of the message that makes clear what is to be done. This is found in segment 16, please fill in the coupon. Since filling in the coupon involved the sending of a donation (20, 22),and since the topic of the unit is help/give (money), the theme may be restated as please give us money.

As thus stated, the theme reflects the topical and thematic prominence discussed in 20.2.3.1 and 20.2.3.2. However, it runs counter to the referential prominence at propositional level, discussed in 20.3.3, where it was pointed out that the appeal in 16 stands in the relation of condition to, and hence is less prominent than, the series of following consequences. This is borne out by the relatively small space given to the appeal, compared to the much larger space (segments 18–22) given to the promised consequences. The appeal, moreover, is expressed generically and allusively: the consequences are spelled out in considerable detail. Why, then, is the appeal considered thematic and the consequences non-thematic?

First, a schema consists of the major elements in the writer’s developing purpose, hence schematic prominence outranks other kinds of prominence. In this instance, the writer’s main purpose is not to send out information packs and badges, but to receive donations. The real purpose of the message is to issue an appeal, not to make promises.

Second, the promised consequences viewed in their role as motivations can hardly be claimed to have thematic status: very few people will send a donation simply in order to receive an information pack and a badge. The real motivation is that provided by the accompanying positive prosody (see 20.2.3.2). The disproportionate emphasis on relatively trivial benefits is deliberate: it provides the opportunity to surround the concept of giving with warmth and attractiveness. The purpose is not to persuade reluctant readers to give donations, but to make them positively want to give. It is the appeal of 16 that expresses the writer’s purpose; the relationally prominent promised consequences are in fact pressed into the service of that appeal.

The first and second configurations stand in supporting roles to the third, and the corresponding elements in the message theme may be derived from the configuration themes with little further discussion. The topic of the first configuration (20.2.1.1) is badgers-in-danger, and its theme (20.2.1.2) is: How distressing it is that such well-loved creatures as badgers are in danger—and from man! The thematic content at message level must therefore focus on the concept badgers-in-danger, and must contain those parts of the subtheme which most adequately fulfil the schema role of arousing interest and emotion. In order to include positive attitudes towards badgers, and indignation at their danger, both of which seem to motivate the writer’s strategy, the minimum possible form of the thematic support here is: Well-loved badgers are in danger from man!

The second configuration has the schematic function of validating the League and its campaign. Its topic (20.2.2.1) is inadequate laws, and its theme (20.2.2.2) is: The laws protecting badgers are inadequate, therefore (we (the League) have begun a campaign so that) they should be changed. The referential prominence carried by the reason-result relation (20.3.2, segment 8) confirms this theme. Since the purpose of the unit is to validate the League and its campaign, these two concepts, although omitted in 20.2.2.1 as non-topical, should also appear in the supporting theme. The concept of badgers-in-danger may be assumed to be carried over from the first configuration, hence may be omitted here. The supporting theme may therefore be stated as: The laws are inadequate, therefore we, the League, are campaigning for them to be changed.

These subthemes, when combined, provide the theme for the message as a whole. The schematic outline of the message correlates the subthemes with the appropriate schema roles, thus:

Badgers\* are in danger from man!

The laws are inadequate, therefore, we, the League,

are campaigning for them to be changed.

Please give us money.

This outline, in the form of high level concepts rather than of words, constitutes the structural framework used by the writer in developing the message, and by the readers in constructing the same message as they read.

Conclusion

No text analysis is ever truly completed. Each linguist has different insights, whether about speech acts, social factors, information rate, or whatever. It is hoped that the model presented here will provide a sort of global matrix in which other cognitive approaches can take root, establish interrelationships, and blossom. The disparate nature of cognitive and discourse studies has been a barrier to progress: this book attempts, in a measure, to dismantle that barrier.

Conspicuously absent from our study, especially from Part 2, is the crucial question of generativeness—not least because messages have to be generated in specific languages, and this is a book about universals. Nevertheless, a basis in universals is of immense importance to generative theory. Generativeness must begin with minds, not with words, and with purposiveness not with propositions. It is my hope that generative linguists will build on the foundation laid here.

A model based on meaning and not on surface structure holds out hope for fresh progress in cross-language studies, and especially in translation, which has long felt the lack of an objective basis of comparison between source and target texts. Translation problems such as assumed information, unknown concepts and differing rhetorical patterns will never cease to be problems, but a model such as that presented here should make them less intractable.

Finally, it has been my aim in writing to tackle technical issues, as far as in me lies, in homespun language. It is my hope that the learned have been human enough to bear with me, and that the still-learning have been able to read with enjoyment.

APPENDIX: THE TEXTS

The Barefoot Revolution

(1) In Bolivia, 43 per cent of under-fives suffer serious malnutrition;

(2) in parts of Brazil only half the children survive to the end of their first year at school;

(3) in some areas of Nigeria, land under millet has fallen by 30-40 per cent in the last ten years

(4) (the population has risen by 25 per cent);

(5) in Cameroon . . . And so the numbers pile up.

(6) Over one-third of humanity has insufficient resources, is underfed, badly cared for and without education.

(7) First World ‘development aid’ has often made things worse:

(8) the Itaipu Dam cost the Brazilians ( . . . ) $25 billion

(9) (national debt $110 billion)

(10) and produces electricity at 30 per cent more than before;

(11) the Aswan Dam prevented silt from flowing to the Nile Delta

(12) and destroyed Egypt’s sardine industry.

(13) There is a better way.

(14) The Barefoot Revolution examines 93 small-scale projects,

(15) run by local people

(16) which address specific local problems:

(17) a marmalade factory in the Philippines which subsidizes local schools;

(18) a four-person factory in Burkina Faso making pots from old cars;

(19) a community mill in Zaire to take some of the workload off women.

(20) The message is clear:

(21) successful aid requires intimate knowledge of local conditions;

(22) throwing dams and railways at people who haven’t the wherewithal to irrigate a single field is like posting a starving man a ‘Get well’ card.

(23) Nick Crane

(24) The Barefoot Revolution by Bertrand Schneider.

(WORLD, May 1988, p. 91)

Daffodil Leaves

(1) How soon can I cut the leaves off my daffodils?

(2) Leaves should be left for six weeks

(3) after the last flower has died

(4) before cutting back.

(5) This period is essential

(6) to rebuild foodstores in the bulb

(7) so that it can grow and flower the following year.

(8) You should remove flowerheads

(9) as soon as they die

(10) so that energy is not diverted

(11) into seed production,

(12) but leave the flower stalk.

(13) If you find the fading bulb leaves unsightly

(14) try planting the daffodils under a spreading deciduous shrub such as hydrangea, flowering quince or fishbone cotoneaster.

(15) The daffodils will stand out against the bare branches of the shrub in the early spring,

(16) but later on the fading bulb leaves will be disguised by the shrub’s leaves and flowers.

(WHICH?, April 1988, p. 184: “Gardening: your questions”)

Deaths in Flight

(1) How many airline passengers die from natural causes while in flight?

(2) According to the International Air Transport Association, between 1977 and 1984 there were 577 reported deaths (Journal of the American Medical Association 1988; 259:1983-8).

(3) This gives a rate of 0.31 per million passengers.

(4) It is no surprise to Minerva, a seasoned traveller, that most deaths were in middle aged men—

(5) hardly anyone else travels by air

(6) (except on holiday charters).

(7) Nor was she surprised to find that in almost half the deaths there was a doctor on board who attempted resuscitation.

(British Medical Journal, vol. 296, May 14, 1988, p. 1403: “News and Notes, Views by Minerva”)

Fountains

(1) Fountains enchant me—

(2) in the daytime, when the sunlight turns their scattered drops into diamonds;

(3) after dark, when coloured lights are played on them,

(4) and the night rains emeralds, rubies, sapphires.

(5) Best of all, when the last colour is whisked away,

(6) and there they are in a dazzling white glory!

(7) But where are they now, these magical jets of water?

(8) Our towns are crammed with all manner of things

(9) that no people in their senses asked for;

(10) yet where are the fountains?

(11) Let us have a policy of full employment, increased production, a balanced This and a planned That,

(12) but let us also have fountains—

(13) more and more fountains, higher fountains, fountains like wine, like blue and green fire,

fountains like diamonds in every square.

(14) Crazy?

(15) Probably.

(16) But why not try going delightfully mad?

(17) Why not stop spouting ourselves

(18) and let it be done for us by graceful, exquisite, beautiful fountains?

(J. B. Priestley, Reader’s Digest, September 1979, p. 60)

London Wall Find

(1) A 10-metre section of the London wall has been found by Museum of London archaeologists,

(2) who discovered part of the outer wall for the first time,

(3) it was announced last night.

(4) The remains, near Fenchurch Street Station, are to be preserved in a building

(5) being developed on the site by Arundel House (City) Ltd,

(6) which financed a seven-week investigation.

(7) “We have never been able to see the outer wall until now,”

(8) the museum said.

(9) A barbican was also found.

(The Times, Thursday 22 June, 1989, p. 2)

Look Out for the Badger

(1) The badger, one of Britain’s best-loved animals, has been part of our heritage for so long

(2) that its traditional country name—Brock (meaning bi-coloured)—has been woven into the names of our villages and towns nationwide.

(3) Yet badgers are in danger.

(4) And these harmless creatures have only one predator.

(5) Man.

(6) Despite laws designed to protect them,

(7) an estimated 10,000 badgers a year are brutally killed by illegal badger digging.

(8) Loop-holes in the law mean that

(9) although the animals are protected,

(10) their underground homes are not.

(11) The League has launched an urgent campaign, through Parliament,

(12) to tighten up the laws.

(13) We need to ensure that

(14) anyone caught digging at a badger sett is committing an offence.

(15) If you’d like to help the badgers---

(16) please fill in the coupon

(17) and help us to win this vital campaign.

(18) You will receive a special information pack

(19) outlining ways in which you can help.

(20) Your donation—whatever you can spare—will be gratefully received

(21) and carefully used on the badgers’ behalf.

(22) And we’ll be glad to send you our special enamel badge for donations over £10.00 as a thank you for your concern.

(BBC Wildlife, vol. 7, no. 4, April 1989, p. 243)

The Motorist and the Joggers

(1) A motorist pulled over on a side street to have a nap.

(2) As he settled down in the seat and closed his eyes,

(3) a jogger rapped on his window to ask the time.

(4) Bleary-eyed, he found his watch

(5) and proclaimed it to be 8 a.m.

(6) Sleeping at last,

(7) he was soon awakened by another jogger rapping on the window.

(8) “Excuse me, sir, do you know the time?” he asked.

(9) Looking at his watch,

(10) he told the man it was 8.30.

(11) At this rate he wasn’t getting much sleep,

(12) so he wrote a short note

(13) and stuck it on the window for all to see.

(14) It stated: “I don’t know the time.”

(15) Again the man settled down for his sorely needed nap.

(16) A few minutes later another jogger came along

(17) and began rapping on the window.

(18) “Hey, mister,” he said, “it’s a quarter to nine.”

(C. Julio Kaye, Reader’s Digest, August 1986, pp. 89–90)

Multiple Sclerosis

(1) Multiple sclerosis is known to occur more frequently in high latitudes

(2) but nevertheless some figures from Australia are dramatic (Brain 1988; 111:1-25).

(3) In Perth and Newcastle (latitude about 35S) the prevalence rates in 1961 were 19.5 and 18.2

(4) and in 1981 these had risen to 29.9 and 36.5.

(5) In Hobart (latitude 45S) the rates were 34.5 and 75.6 per 100,000.

(6) The increase between 1961 and 1981 was probably due (at least in part) to better diagnosis and increased survival;

(7) the geographical differences are difficult to explain,

(8) since Australia has uniform high standards of medical care, sanitation, and nutrition,

(9) and the racial mix of the three cities is not very different.

(British Medical Journal, vol. 296, May 14, 1988, p. 1403: “News and Notes, Views by Minerva”)

The Picnic

(1) The Rat brought the boat alongside the bank,

(2) made her fast,

(3) helped the still awkward Mole safely ashore,

(4) and swung out the luncheon basket.

(5) The Mole begged as a favour

(6) to be allowed to unpack it all by himself;

(7) and the Rat was very pleased to indulge him,

(8) and to sprawl at full length on the grass

(9) and rest,

(10) while his excited friend shook out the tablecloth

(11) and spread it,

(12) took out all the mysterious packets one by one

(13) and arranged their contents in due order,

(14) still gasping,

(15) “O my! O my!”

(16) at each fresh revelation.

(17) When all was ready,

(18) the Rat said,

(19) “Now pitch in, old fellow!”

(20) and the Mole was indeed very glad to obey,

(21) for he had started his spring-cleaning at a very early hour that morning,

(22) as people will do,

(23) and had not paused

(24) for bite or sup;

(25) and he had been through a very great deal since that distant time

(26) which now seemed so many days ago.

(Kenneth Grahame, The Wind in the Willows, Methuen Children’s Books edition, 1980 (original 1908), p. 8.)

Radon

(1) As many as 20,000 Americans may be dying each year from lung cancer

(2) caused by radon

(3) the radioactive gas emitted by rocks such as granite (Science 1988; 240:606-8).

(4) Radon acts synergistically with tobacco,

(5) so that few radon deaths are in non-smokers;

(6) but nevertheless scientists in the United States are pointing to

(7) the contrast between the apparent lack of concern about radon

(8) and the public and official attitudes that have led to the banning of a lipstick dye orange 19–

(9) on the grounds that it has a one in 20 billion chance of causing cancer.

(British Medical Journal, vol. 296, May 14, 1988, p. 1403: “News and Notes, Views by Minerva”)

Shellfish

(1) In Britain in the last decade substantial increases have been seen in infections acquired from uncooked shellfish—

(2) especially cockles and oysters.

(3) These include both gastroenteritis and hepatitis (World Health Organisation Weekly Epidemiological Record 1988; 63:133–4).

(4) The cause is thought to be increasing contamination of estuaries by sewage;

(5) until this pollution is controlled

(6) the conclusion has to be that

(7) “bivalve shellfish cannot be supplied with a guarantee that they are free of virus contamination.”

(British Medical Journal, vol. 296, May 14, 1988, p. 1403: “News and Notes, Views by Minerva”)

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