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The Philosophy of Composition

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> My own words take me by surprise
> and teach me what I know.
>
> Merleau-Ponty

> Meaning is neither before nor
> after the act...Thus, the notion
> of an Idea or 'interior design'
> as simply anterior to a work
> which would supposedly be expression
> of it is a prejudice.
>
> Derrida

I. The Current Philosophy of Composition

Composition is a curious discipline. It has the odd status of being one of the few academic disciplines which the holders of the bureaucratic pursestrings would not like to see immediately eliminated. Let all of the theoretical physicists become engineers, civil or otherwise; let all of the literary critics go to law school and put to good use their massive reading ability; let all of the linguists finally satisfy their maiden aunts' dreams and become interpreters at the United Nations. But good God, maintain the composition status quo since any straying tendencies under the Right to Write are a bit more philistine than necessary.

Added to composition's privileged place (or, at least, monetarily secure place) is the fact that composition is one of those disciplines which has no body of theory which it can properly call its own. Composition is a scavenger, stealing bits of explanation from linguistics, psychology, classical rhetoric, logic, philosophy (and physics and mathematics, if some "theorist" could figure out how to use them). Whence the complete oddity of the field: composition is deemed one of the most important academic disciplines, an autonomous and relatively stable field; at the same time it is one of the least respectable since it is theoryless and therefore unattractive for "thinkers."

Given this situation, one would think that a book which addresses both the importance of composition and its lack of theory would be well worth reading, at least for its integrity. Such a work is E.D. Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition, written by a man who, after completing his tenure as chairman of a large and very literary English department, asked to be named director of freshman composition, a request indicative of the author's recognition of the importance of composition:

> I began to wonder how long our university
> would continue its big expenditure on
> literary teaching and scholarship without
> insisting that we devote comparable
> energies to the teaching that was paying
> for so many of our literary courses--
> namely the teaching of composition.[1]

And it is also a book which looks <u>laterally</u> for its theory: "...the chief matters addressed by the book are those that connect linguistics, psycholinguistics, and historical philology with the goals of composition teaching" (Hirsch, p. 2).

In what follows I want to examine <u>not</u> how the book meets its claim to saying anything at all since it is unquestioned that composition theory merits a priori interest. Rather, I want to look at how the proposed theory of writing (the philosophy of composition) substantiates its claim to (empirical) roots in linguistics while addressing the standard composition aporias:

> What are the distinctive features of written,
> as compared with oral, speech?...Can we deter-
> mine by such linguistic and historical analyses
> the universal characteristics of good prose,
> and thence the most appropriate goals for teaching
> composition?...More particularly, what are the
> psycholinguistic bases of good prose, and how
> can our knowledge of these psycholinguistic
> principles lead to progress in teaching com-
> position? (Hirsch, pp. 2-3)

Because these are by no means new questions, Hirsch's responses are mercilessly open to terrorism, which I will restrain from engaging in since the old questions are the most intriguing, provided that they are answered by more than vagaries. Hirsch claims to have surpassed chanted answers and educational ideology: "I believe that the empirical evidence I have adduced and interpreted has raised my argument above mere ideology" (Hirsch, p. 4). I confess here (somewhat prematurely) that his argument is little above old-school ideology with a pseudo-base in linguistics. Let us see how his philosophy of composition runs.

In a nutshell, the philosophy of composition is as follows: good prose is readable prose, and composition instruction ought to be designed to show students how to produce readable prose. Of course, the crux of this position (not a new position at that) is the definition of "readable," which Hirsch goes through elaborate machinations to spell out, with commentary on the nature of prose as a convenient by-product. Unfortunately, almost everything that he says on these matters is either trivial or wrong.

Let us consider first some of the statements purported to be major claims in this theory, but which are, in reality, rather short-sighted and unimportant. In chapters one and two of his book, Hirsch goes to great pains to argue against Bloomfieldian conceptions of written language (that writing is simply the graphic rendering of oral speech) in order to show that prose is autonomous. He argues in this counter to Bloomfield that written language has a grapholect (written dialect), that the grapholect has its own conventions, and that it is individuated as a complete

linguistic system in literate societies. Who, however, would ever question any of Hirsch's claims these days? To be sure, no linguist would side with the Bloomfieldian position because linguists and literary theorists (including Hirsch himself[2]) have made it quite obvious that written texts are corpora with rules all their own. From such a stance, it is easily deducible that written language has its own normative conventions.

However, such notions do not cease with Hirsch's second chapter. He subsequently argues that written texts are problematic phenomena because they are without overt devices to mark stress, intonation, audience, and other such things that oral speech has. Apart from the fact that this comparison flies in the face of his earlier contention that oral and written speech are incomparable, Hirsch has argued for the very things that could be deduced from his previous argument for the individuation of the grapholect: obviously the grapholect has conventions of its own (e.g., no intonation)--- it _is_ a grapholect. His argument is analytically true, and therefore of little note.

Perhaps such conclusions are attributable to Hirsch's naiveté in linguistic matters, an explanation which no doubt could be offered to account for the surfeit of banal proposals that dominate all philosophies of composition, not just Hirsch's. But Hirsch is slightly unique here in offering psycholinguistic support for his positions. He thus advances the arguments that prose, if it is to be readable, must hold the reader's attention and perceptions, must consider intention, and must employ frequent closure. Who would argue with any of this? Certainly, professional composition teachers would not dispute any of these notions, especially since they have passed for standard composition instruction for years. Nor would any linguist dispute these claims since they are givens in any examination of a communicative situation. To argue against them is foolhardy; to argue for them is super-fluous.

But if my purpose, here, were solely to indicate Hirsch's shortsighted-ness, I would accomplish little more than antagonism since plenty of in-teresting theories have begun on not-so-interesting premises. But Hirsch's theory is so flawed that it is difficult to see where the theory begins or ends.

Ostensibly, the philosophy of readable prose begins with considerations of the nature of written language, which, to Hirsch, demands that one con-sider the nature of script systems, their development, and their efficiency. That is, one must consider the meta-nature of prose. This initial step in the theory is suspect since it based on a category mistake: the nature of script systems (how ideographic systems have evolved into alphabetic ones) says little about the nature of writing systems since writing is surely not some derivative scriptal function. But the theory proceeds to elaborate on the unique nature of prose, given its scriptal origins. Of particular note is that prose, as an elaborated code (à la Basil Bernstein), must mark itself internally as it creates its own situational context since it has none of the devices which oral speech has to mark context: namely, intonation, gesture, pitch, etc. As Hirsch says: "...the important distinctive features of written discourse and the chief difficulty of composition is [sic] its isolation from any particular situational context" (Hirsch, p. 21), which means that prose "has to make up for its lack of intonation, gesture, and facial expression" (Hirsch, p. 22). Although such contentions seem unques-tionable, they are completely wrong. For one thing, if composition were devoid

of any situational context, many of the traditional problems of composition could be solved immediately since the activity could be taught in those terms (as context-free). But every piece of written discourse has a situation: pragmatics, insofar as it has meant "situation," is also applicable to texts (see van Dijk's work[3]). Furthermore, if there is any piece of written discourse which is most readily situational, it is the composition! What is the pragmatics of the novel? The answer is anyone's guess, but most likely it is what the interpretant brings to bear on the isolated text (to use Hirsch's own critical terminology). What is the pragmatics of the composition? It is ineluctably the situation of the composition class with a composition teacher who will read the text and probably react to it in the manner that most other composition teachers react to the compositions they read. And that is the crucial point: one of the most important problems in composition is that the composition has such a precise situational context: virtually every composition student comes to the writing task with an already well-developed system of situational expectations about writing. If any sort of instruction must be done in this respect, then students must be taught to un-learn the explicit situational context of the composition; otherwise, students will never produce anything but the classic COMPOSITION-CLASS composition, which is unpalatable to all composition teachers, but covertly demanded by most of them. When written discourse is given this less explicit context, then perhaps "good, readable prose" can be gotten, but until then, the explicit composition pragmatics rules it out.

But if the above problem seems wholly the opposite of what Hirsch supposes it to be, consider the fact that his entire argument on the pragmatics of prose is viciously contradictory to begin with. The gist of his position is that written language must achieve, in alternative ways, what oral language achieves automatically through its design-features. But if written language is fundamentally different from oral language, as Hirsch's previous elaboration of the trivial has shown, why must it be taught to be comparable to oral language? Why do they have to achieve the same purposes? How can they achieve the same purposes if they are so basically different? In short, the presumption of the fundamental separation of writing and speaking and a program predicated on their ultimate equivalence make for a very shaky philosophy of readable prose.

However, the philosophy of composition never recovers from these initial flaws, and subsequent, gross, linguistic misconceptions render it (linguistically, at least) groundless. Per force, consider how the grapholect is a natural language of instruction because its autonomy and pervasiveness allow it to dominate all other sorts of language in a literate society. One must first assume, in Hirsch's argument, that "children have always been the principle agents of language change" (Hirsch, p. 48). Now, with the grapholect as the standard language in literate societies and with "the widespread use of standard language on television" (Hirsch, p. 48), the language of the young (and hence the language of the future) is going to approximate the grapholect more and more. Thus, composition instruction profits from this situation since the language of compositions, the grapholect, now has a natural tendency toward becoming the spoken language of society, facilitating greatly the propagation of literacy. Moreover, given that "the range of variations tolerated within a dialect is always narrower than the range tolerated within a national language" (Hirsch, p. 47), the grapholect becomes the perfect language of literacy since, in addition to being pervasive and

spoken, it (as the national language) is open to great stylistic variation and thus allows room for every person to express himself freely (or more freely than in pre-grapholect times).

Every one of these assumptions can be questioned and dismissed. First, there is no evidence (and Hirsch gives none) that children cause the major changes in language, beyond the trivial truth that children usually live longer than their parents and hence pass on the changes that their parents have given them. Children learn the variations in the language that surrounds them and are less likely to institute change simply because of the power structure into which they are born. To say, then that children are the principal agents of language change is both trivial and false. Second, Hirsch has unnecessarily conflated "grapholect," "standard language," and "national language." A grapholect is a written dialect of a language. A standard language is a methodological abstraction invented by linguists and educators: it is a phantasm--no convincing evidence exists in support of the reality of a standard language (whether it be called a "grapholect" or anything else). If, by "standard language," Hirsch means "dominant dialect," then he is surely wrong in equating dominant dialect and grapholect since the only speech community where speaking and writing are very similar is academia, and it requires extensive submission to this academic language-- not a simple engagement with the "natural" surrounding grapholect--before this unification of writing and speaking occurs. And a national language is the oral language of political power in some demarcated geo-political area: it is never a grapholect; a grapholect is never a national language; a national language can be a standard language, but certainly not, by transitivity, does that make the national language a grapholect. These ideas should all be kept distinct. Third (to continue the list of false assumptions) television has had no noticeable leveling influence on language variation: that is, even if some standard language were used on television and it isn't), it would not become the spoken language of the television viewers, precisely because there is no continual, punitive effect from television, directing its viewers, correcting them, and coercing them to speak standard televisionese Fourth and finally, there is no evidence supporting the claim that dialects have a smaller range of variations than does a national language, apart from the trivial truth that a national language consists of dialects and therefore consists of the totality of dialectal variations (and hence has more variation than any single dialect). Assuming that such a question as range of dialectal variation were even an empirical question and not mere conjecture, how could such a thing be measured? What is a range of variation?

There are no answers to such questions forthcoming from Hirsch, and thus these assumptions lend no credence to the argument for the grapholect. The claim that the grapholect dominates, or will dominate in the future, is bogus; a grapholect (not a national/standard language) dominates as both speech and writing only in academia, which gives a curious twist to matters at hand, since it is only in academia where people are asked to write compositions, not in the natural, grapholectized world, a fact which Hirsch fails to note. All of these claims about the grapholect are, in fact, irrelevant to the matter at hand, namely the philosophy of academic writing, a subject which Hirsch has little time for, especially since, given the "establishment" of natural tendencies in the grapholect, he dwells considerably on the natural, progressive tendencies in prose itself, presumably to show how prose works inherently, so that one can design composition instruction according to these inherent features.

What is the natural evolutionary tendency of prose? It is, curiously enough, the same tendency as occurs in spoken language (lest we forget that writing and speech are supposed to be different): language changes inherently for the better, for the sake of simplicity, or as Hirsch says: "...the evidence seems to me irresistable that the languages of which we possess a continuous record have indeed moved on the whole towards increased communicative efficiency" (Hirsch, p. 53). The irresistable evidence for this position comes from Otto Jespersen, who believes that over time, the forms of language become shorter, the forms of language become fewer, their formation becomes more regular, their inflections are lost so that all languages tend to become analytic (non-inflectional and relying on word order for syntactic marking). Further evidence comes from George K. Zipf's Law of Least Effort, which is "an impressive amount of statistical data from several languages" (Hirsch, p. 55) which shows that there is an inverse relation between the complexity of linguistic forms and their use: i.e., complex forms are infrequent, supposedly suggesting that simplicity/efficiency are the order of the day in language.

What validity does this argument for efficiency have? It has none. The forms of language do not become shorter over time: note, e.g., that the bloating of English technical vocabulary is due almost totally to the influx of multi-morphemic lexical items---superanticryogenericization-- which are surely not shorter forms. The forms of language do not become fewer: if anything, the forms of language are in a steady-state---witness, in this regard, how the loss of voiceless stops in proto-Germanic was reconciled by the creation of them subsequently from the voiced stops. Languages do not tend to become analytic: modern Finnish has twelve grammatical cases, with inflections to mark all of them.

This whole idea of progressive change in language toward communicative efficiency is a throwback to a defunct Romanticism, as hopeless now as it was when Schleicher first proposed the idea, based on his belief in Darwinian[4] explanations of everything, including non-organic entities such as language. If languages, like organisms, change progressively toward a more "adaptable" simplicity and efficiency, why in current Russian is there a proliferation of instrumentally-marked predicates replacing the "standard Indo-European" nominative form in nouns following the copula? Why do the dialects of Southern American English lose their nominal plural markers and create ambiguities (i.e., [tæsk] = [tæskØ] (pl.) and [tæsk] (sing.))? How and why did the incredibly complex Chinese ideographic system ever develop? Why do Czech and other Slavic languages retain much of the supposed Indo-European surplus of case markings while the other Indo-European languages lost them long ago "for the sake of simplicity and efficiency"? Is the Germanic sound shift an instance of simplification since it is essentially a re-cycling of the Indo-European consonantal inventory? Isn't an analytic language (presumably a simpler language) actually more complex than an inflectional language if the former language has fewer case markings than the latter, thus demanding that grammatical distinctions be conceptualized, not memorized from markings, by the speakers? Isn't an analytical language, the telos of efficient evolution, actually less efficient than one with case markings since it has a more restricted word order and hence has little po- tential for stylistic form to vary with the expressive needs of the situation?

Isn't the virtual disappearance of the dual in Indo-European languages an in-efficient change since its absence concomitantly eliminates a speaker's ability to speak uniquely about a certain distinction in the world, namely only two objects. I could go on here with innumerable examples of "inefficient" language change, but the point is sufficiently clear. Who could ever say that languages change toward simplicity and efficiency? Who could ever say that this is a natural aspect of language? Roman Jakobson, in fact, has noted that a so-called simplification in one part of a language causes a complication in another part, an observation certainly not in accord with Hirsch's tour de force in invoking Zipf's Law in support of his efficiency argument since it means that languages become as complicated in usage as they become simple. But apart from this interesting little symmetry in language change, Zipf's Law has no credibility to begin with. It has not only been questioned as to its statistical validity, but if it is even correct in any instance, it is trivial since it is so broad that it applies to all natural phenomena, not just lexical forms.[5]

But while it is obvious to a person who considers actual linguistic data that language change does not work progressively toward efficiency and simplicity, it is not so obvious to Hirsch, who proceeds to discuss the efficient evolutionary state of prose, now that he has "established" that all language moves toward this "goal." Unfortunately, his observations on prose are as misguided as those on language change, precisely because he assumes, once again, that observations about oral language hold likewise for written language. Consider a major statement in his argument that, over time, prose has evolved toward greater communicative efficiency: "In every sixteenth century grapholect of Europe, we will probably find great variations in the effectiveness of prose" (Hirsch, p. 60). How could a statement such as this ever be verified? It is even dubious that anyone could ever judge the effectiveness of current prose, much less that of a language known to us only through its texts, since for the latter task we would need at least one living, native speaker of a sixteenth-century European language, a hard request indeed. An argument such as this is nonsense, in the classic positivistic sense. This pretense to empiricism tells us nothing about the nature of prose or its "progressive evolution": the former merits a different approach, and the latter is non-existent.

I think that Hirsch's problems with his "philosophy of composition" can be summarized rather neatly. He has conflated simplicity and efficiency and has failed to substantiate either as universal aspects of language, and by dictum, has also failed to substantiate either as aspects that ought to be part of a theory of composition. He has further embraced fully the naive nineteenth-century view of language as an organism which undergoes evolution, changes for communicative survival, and derives from earlier corrupted (or inefficient) forms. Such a position not only has been refuted for at least one hundred years, but also has the insidious consequence of requiring ar-guments based on the "natural" aspects of language (whatever they are). Hence, Hirsch's acceptance of the vacuous position that language "naturally" tends toward efficiency and simplicity, as supported by the "naturalness" of the grapholect, bears on his composition theory in that he insists that good prose is natural prose, that natural prose is prose adhering to natural prose processes, and that natural prose processes are simplicity and efficiency. Thus, good prose (what students should be taught to write) is simple and efficient. Such reasoning has the tenor of political theories which stress

"natural law" pressed to the service of democracy or socialism, when most natural law is actually either anarchy or Fascism. One ought to see that such "natural" theories are far from weighty.

Simplicity and efficiency are old ideas to composition theorists, and apart from the question of their naturalness in prose, Hirsch wants to reify them in the notion of "readability," a psycholinguistic concept characterizing efficient text-processing by a reader. This notion is really the core of Hirsch's theory: what he is trying to do is to clothe old ideas in modern psycholinguistic garb, with debatable success.

A text is readable if it employs frequent closure, fulfills expectations sufficiently, and provides adequate context: all of these factors aid a reader's cognition of the composition. But how does one judge if a text meets these readability criteria? One must rely on the criterion of absolute synonymy: "Assuming that two texts convey the same meaning, the more readable text will take less time and effort to understand" (Hirsch, p. 85). This is all well and good, provided that two texts actually can convey the same meaning, but there is no evidence at all that such absolute synonymy exists. In fact, to use Hirsch's own system on itself here, if two linguistic elements were absolutely synonymous, wouldn't it be egregiously in-efficient to have them both in the language since they are duplicates? How could the language have evolved in such a redundant way? All cynicism aside, I think that the lack of absolute synonymy can, indeed, be illustrated from Hirsch's own writing. He gives an example, in chapter four, of how to make a more readable text out of a less readable one, while retaining the exact meaning of the original. Not only is this the only instantiation of the philosophy of composition, but it is a crucial one, in that it supposedly illustrates the hub of the theory: efficient rendering of prior meaning through the production of a readable text. The first passage below is a quote from Bormuth; the second is Hirsch's revision of it, a revision which presumably retains the full meaning of the first while rendering the passage more efficiently expressed/ understood:

> A second question was whether or not the
> relationship between language variables and
> the difficulty of that language was linear.
> For example, is the difference in difficulty
> between two and three syllable words as
> great as the difficulty between seven and
> eight syllable words? If not, the simple
> correlation techniques used by early researchers
> yielded misleading results. Bormuth (1966)
> found that many of the relationships showed
> varying degrees of curvature.

My revision:

> Another unanswered question about readability
> formulas was whether relationships such as
> those between reading-difficulty and word-
> length were constant relationships. For ex-
> ample, is the difference in difficulty between
> two and three syllable words the same as the

difference between seven and eight syllable
words? If not, the simple averaging techniques
of early researchers yielded misleading results.
Bormuth (1966) found that the relationship between
reading difficulty and traits used in readability
formulas were in fact inconstant relationships
(Hirsch, p. 84).

All of Hirsch's revisions in the name of readability amount to two things:
insertion of information surrounding the passage before it was extracted
from the complete text; changing the technical vocabulary to more common
terminology. The first sort of revision is superfluous since the reader
has the information anyway from the rest of the text; it is a rather cheap
way of obtaining readability. The second revision contradicts the synonymy
argument since the revised passage is wrong in relation to the first. Con-
sider, as far as the latter point goes, what Hirsch changes. He replaces
"linear" with "constant relationships." Is this an adequate paraphrase of
"linear"? No, it is a truism to say that a linear correlation is a constant
correlation. Of course a linear correlation is constant, but it is such in
that the ratio of the change of each of the correlated elements equals one;
Hirsch gives an understatement, not a synonym. He also changes "correlation
techniques" to "averaging techniques." Is correlation an averaging? No,
averaging actually has nothing to do with correlation---in the statistical
sense---which is the problem here. Hirsch has tried to translate the
semantics of one academic discipline into the semantics of everyday language,
or something like everyday language. In doing so, he was forsaken most of
the interesting distinctions inherent in the definitions of statistics. To
wit: he translates "curvature" as "inconstant relationship." Even if a
curvilinear correlation could be construed as an inconstant relation, it
is so only in a very trivial sense. Curvilinear correlation actually means
that one value decreases or increases at a greater rate than the increase
or decrease of another value, and to call that relation "inconstant" is to
miss the interesting facts which curvature of correlation indicates to the
statistician or educational psychologist. Thus, the only readable synonyms
which Hirsch can give for statistical concepts are either incorrect or
trivial ones, characteristics which have become more than appropriate for
his theory of composition.
    It is impossible to make consistent judgments of readability because
synonymy, the constant, does not exist. Every revision of a text produces
a new text, with new contingencies of readability. Hirsch, in fact, has
an inkling of this, and suggests that his empirical readability be re-named
"relative readability." But this re-naming introduces serious problems.
How is readability even empirical (which is the whole purpose for having
it) if it is entirely contingent? How does anyone---let us say, e.g., a
composition student---make sense out of the vague criteria for this
empirical notion?

        (1)Closure must occur frequently enough to
        accommodate short-term memory and not inter-
        rupt the forward movement of the mind. (2)
        Expectation must be sufficiently fulfilled
        to achieve semantic integration without inter-
        rupting this forward movement. (3) Contextualization

must be sufficiently explicit to indicate the
contours of implication without interrupting
the forward movement (Hirsch, p. 137).

How is "frequent enough closure" judged empirically? How is "sufficient
fulfillment of expectation" judged empirically? How is "sufficiently
explicit contextualization" judged empirically? What are "contours of
implication"? And so on, and so on...

The counter-intuitiveness of "relative readability" and the absence
of ground for judging readability through revision demolish the bases of
a psycholinguistic theory of writing built on the natural state of
evolving prose. The philosophy of composition is actually very much
old-school ideology masked by footnotes to linguists. Per force: the
practical applications of this philosophy of composition demand that
composition teachers judge compositions for the quality of their in-
tentions, their correctness, and the quality of their presentation
(see Hirsch, p. 186), and demand that composition texts approximate
Strunk and White's Elements of Style (old-school Bible). These are
old applications of old solutions to old problems. But at least
these applications make no pretense to linguistic and psycholinguistic
validity, since such excursions by one theorist have indeed shown that
"composition research [has] become as chaotic as the California gold rush.
Good work [is] as hard to find as nuggets in a well-panned stream"
(Hirsch, p. 169).

II. Toward a Believable Philosophy of Composition

The absence of a tenable philosophy of composition demands that the
essential definitions of the field be reworked. Let us ask the hard
question: what is composition? Is it the writing of precise essays?
Is it the writing of succinct essays? Is it the writing of essays
modeled after the great writers of our time? Is its business "the in-
stant humanizing of the incoming barbarian through a selective look at
science, popular and esoteric arts, psychology and sociology"?[6] Is it
the choosing of the more readable of two synonymous texts? It is none
of these. Composition must be viewed as an activity enmeshed in the
system of academia. Given that academia is a plurality of semantic
systems, that academic disciplines are actually systematic ways of talking
about the world,[7] composition is the production of texts and discourses
which are acceptable (to varying degrees) within this plurality of semantic
systems. Such a definition of composition changes the tenor of the
activity considerably.

Composition as the production of acceptable academic texts means
that composition is a performance (to use the Chomskyan verbiage), and
therefore is a probabilistic endeavor. Composition has been viewed too
long in the past as some sort of categorical capability, some timeless
method that will suffice not only for the generation of every kind of
text that a student will have to write in academia, but also for every
text that he will write in his life. Such a conception of composition

is so far from realistic that it is foolish to consider at any great length. A piece of writing--a composition in particular--is the product of a body of knowledge which the author draws on, supposes to be relevant for the writing task at hand, and allows to be affected by the very act of writing; or to paraphrase Chafe,[8] one must access a body of knowledge to produce a discourse, but what one knows changes as the discourse proceeds. In composition, this body of knowledge is the semantics of disciplines which the student has internalized to some extent, knowledge which changes as he writes about it.

Furthermore, if composition is the production of academic texts, and if production has its obverse in comprehension (as is argued in numerous psycholinguistc texts), then reading and writing are intimately linked. Although it has been known for some time that reading is as crucial as writing in composition, it has not been known that reading is as probabilistic as writing. If comprehension is as much a performance as writing is, then the comprehension of a student's text by, say, a composition teacher is as contingent as the writing of it. This means that the understanding, judging, and grading of a composition rest on a fundamental probabilism since the reader's access to the knowledge in the text is a function of the likelihood of a match between the reader's semantic system and the system which appears to him to be in the text. This point cannot be emphasized enough. If there is any idea that is thoroughly entrenched in current philosophies of composition it is that composition teachers---readers of compositions---are the possessors of some absolute body of knowledge which they can categorically bring to bear on the writings of their charges and which provides them with the credentials to praise or demean those writings. But such an attitude is nonsensical. Reading comprehension depends on what Gestalts constrain the knowledge of the reader. Thus, to suppose that the teacher/reader of composition is privy to the grammatological summum bonum is not only foolish, but also insidious and rather arbitrary.

With composition as an academic performance and relativism as the order of the day, the activity of composition becomes an act of negotiation within the confines of the academic semantics surrounding the act, and it is thus a negotiation which takes place within the history of all academic knowledge that has been produced or ever will be (mea culpa: these are Derridaian/ Foucaultian assessments). Given the historicity and the transactional nature of composition, the philosophy of composition is rather like the phenomenology of composition. The student produces a negotiable piece of academic knowledge; the composition is a commodity, something bargained for. It is something which may or may not be understood, which may or may not cohere to the system of knowledge it occurs in. But these are things which must be decided <u>as the composition is read and written</u>, not after the fact and certainly not beforehand. Otherwise, one falls into the common stance of assuming interior/anterior designs in the reading and writing, a stance which can lead only to tautologies or contradictions: one verifies what one expects, or one decides that one's expectations were not fulfilled. Either way, one runs into analytic thinking, a mode of thought which obviously leads nowhere.

Given the above phenomenological bent to composition, the discipline ought to be devoted to the exposition and facilitation with what Husserl and Martin have called the nomological status of academia.[9] That is, composition should teach the non-denotative, the non-referential, the axiomatic. That is not to say that composition should instruct students to produce fantasy; rather it is to say that composition should not get bogged down in

insisting on the production of _ontologically_ relevant texts, object-oriented texts, texts which cohere extrinsically. Given the nature of academic information, students should not be asked to produce information which is decidedly contrary to it: namely descriptions of the world, concrete terms (the insidious Orwellian notion of writing), or descriptions of events and people in precise language. No other texts that they will write subsequently in academia will require them to perform in a similar manner: why should they engage in ontologically relevant writing, then, as training for nomological, axiomatic writing?

Needless to say, the same arguments hold for _reading_. It is senseless to demand that students read extracts from _Time_ or _The New Yorker_ as model prose pieces when these publications are committed to ontology rather than nomology: that is, they are committed to expositions in referential discourse rather than axiomatic discourse. What students will read subsequently in academia will be almost entirely nomological, axiomatic, and immune to absolute verification procedures. Why have them read preparatory texts which are completely the opposite of this program?

The recognition of the important place of nomology in composition is a nice complement to a philosophy of composition based on probabilism and performance since the nomological status of the information to be put in a composition has an arbitrary base, just like any axiomatic system. Given this arbitrariness, the only sensible way to judge such a text is through negotiation and dialogue, not through imposition and categorical judgments. And this question of negotiated knowledge and dialogue points truly to the fundamental problem of composition, which is _not_ that students cannot write, _not_ that television has hampered thinking, _not_ that students are imprecise thinkers, etc., etc. The basic problem of composition is that students will turn in a text which seems eminently reasonable to them, but which is unreasonable to the teachers/ readers. This paradox cannot be resolved by a reversion to outdated ideologies dressed in technical eupheuisms; it can be resolved only through a reasoned consideration of the acts of reading and writing in the contexts of academia.

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Notes

[1] E.D. Hirsch, _The Philosophy of Composition_ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. xii; all subsequent references to this work will be cited by author's name and page number in text.

[2] See, for example, E.D. Hirsch, _Validity in Interpretation_ (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

[3] See Teun van Dijk, _Pragmatics of Language and Literature_ (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1976) and _Text and Context: Explorations in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse_ (London: Longman, 1977).

[4] Perhaps it is more appropriate to call Schleicher a Lamarckian than a Darwinian.

[5] See Raoul N. Smith, Probabilistic Performance Models of Language (The Hague: Mouton, 1973) for refutations of Zipf's Law.

[6] James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 1.

[7] See William Frawley, "The Structure of Academic Knowledge: Theory and Application," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1979; Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (N.Y.: Random House, 1970) and The Archaeology of Knowledge (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1972); Charles Duch and William Frawley, "A System of Semantic Equivalence in Specialized Discourse," Papers in Linguistics, 10, 467-81.

[8] Wallace Chafe, "Discourse Structure and Human Knowledge," in John Carroll and Roy Freedle, eds., Language Comprehension and the Acquisition of Knowledge (N.Y.: Wiley, 1972), pp. 41-69.

[9] See Edmund Husserl, Logical Investigations (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922) and R.M. Martin, Belief, Existence, and Meaning (N.Y.: NYU Press, 1969).