

Reading Research And The Evaluation of Writing

Charles J. Fillmore
Department of Linguistics
University of California at Berkeley

Note: Research reported here has been supported by NIE Grant No. G-790121 Rev. 1, "Text Semantic Analysis of Reading Comprehension Texts." Co-PIs are C.J. Fillmore and P. Kay.

Sometimes when we don't understand what we're reading, it's our fault, and sometimes it isn't. The question of whether somebody is a good reader is inescapably connected with the issue of whether what is being read was well written. I have found that the process of imagining or observing readers as they interpret (or fail to interpret) particular texts not only offers insights into the difference between successful and unsuccessful readers but also wisdom about the difference between considerate, well-constructed texts and unreasonable, incoherent texts.

With a group of colleagues and students from different disciplines at the Berkeley campus of the University of California, over the past two years, I have been engaged in a research effort aimed at discovering and representing the ways in which readers experience written texts. Although the texts used in our research are passages taken from standardized reading tests, the approach we take can be applied in principle to texts of any sort. Central to our work is an idealization for which we have acquired a certain fondness, something we call the *Ideal Reader*. The *Ideal Reader* is a hypothetical creature constructed for any given text, a creature who brings to that text just those bits of background knowledge and just those interpretation skills which the text itself demands. The *Ideal Reader* knows everything the text presupposes and is ready to receive everything the text offers. In constructing an *Ideal Reader* for a given text, with respect to what we take to be its correct interpretation, we examine a text in great detail, determine what it "expects" of the reader to which it appears to be addressed, and then we try to characterize that reader. In particular, we try to construct — as the *Ideal Reader* for a given text — someone capable of deriving the proper interpretation of the text, from the language of the text, via the standard procedures for interpreting text where possible, by other means where necessary.

We distinguish the *Ideal Reader* from the author's *Intended Reader*, because our work is deliberately text-bound; that is, any text can demand of a reader skills and knowledge of which the author was unaware because we don't always express ourselves well. The *Ideal Reader* is to be distinguished as well from what we might call a *Learning Reader*. A *Learning Reader* is someone who might not immediately understand the meaning of a word or the semantic force of a

particular syntactic pattern, but can nevertheless make use of the redundancies in the text to figure such things out. And all of these notions have to be distinguished from the text's real readers, those actual human beings that we observe reading and interpreting a given text on a given occasion.

These notions have been developed as a way of describing the abilities and activities of actual observed readers of our experimental passages. It is apparent that any activity which allows us to describe the ways in which readers interact with texts can serve in one way or another to characterize or evaluate those texts. A text intended for children which does not provide the redundancies needed by a *Learning Reader* deserves to be criticized for that reason alone. A text whose *Ideal Reader* is required to have skills and experience which no real readers can be expected to have (such as the ability to read the author's mind) should be rejected on those grounds. For example, we take a text to be well-constructed if its *Ideal Reader* is identical to its *Intended Reader*; and we regard a text as considerate if its *Ideal Reader* is identical to (or contained in) a reasonably large number of its real readers.

Building on the notion of the *Ideal Reader*, the work of the Berkeley Reading Text Project emphasizes (1) the "dynamics" of the experience of reading and understanding a text, *i.e.*, the step-by-step way in which an *Ideal Reader* receives the text, one piece at a time, and gradually builds up its interpretation; (2) the ways in which observable properties of a text (its lexico-grammatical form, its cohesiveness, its general rhetorical structure) determine the necessary characteristics of our hypothesized *Ideal Reader*; and (3) an interviewing technique which enables us — when it works — to monitor actual readers' progress through a text. Our aim is that of discovering just where the skills and experience of given real readers differ importantly from what the text seems to demand.

The interviewing technique, briefly described, consists in exposing readers to a passage one segment at a time and interrupting them after each increment with all sorts of questions about what they have just figured out, what they expect to see or to learn in the next segment, what kind of text they are dealing with, and how what they have just read ties in with what they read earlier, etc. (The method is not as disturbing to the reading process as its description must make it seem, at least with short passages of the kind we have been using. And it can be streamlined for longer texts.) In principle, at least, this method allows us to pinpoint just those places where the observed real readers fail to achieve

what our hypothesized *Ideal Reader* would have achieved at just that point.

Mysteriously enough, experience with this kind of research has not necessarily made good writers of us, nevertheless it has given us all a certain sensitivity to the things that go on between a text and its interpreter, and hence a certain awareness of the things that can go wrong between a text and its creator. The *Ideal Reader* notion, developed from reading research, can serve as a model of their audience to writers. The reading researcher's experience in watching people try to construct interpretations from badly constructed texts can help us aim toward constructing texts whose *Ideal Reader* approximates the real readers to whom they are addressed.¹ For example, we can be aware, as writers, that if we intend readers to experience surprise at a particular point, or to sense closure, or to have created certain expectations at this point, then we can look back in our

¹In our work we deal mainly — but not by choice — with badly constructed texts.

text to see if previous portions of it in fact prepared readers for these experiences. In those places where we sense that the *Ideal Reader* needs to be clairvoyant, or needs to be able to recognize allusions to facts and experiences shared only by an accidental and small portion of the people we want to revise our text. Of it we see that the text's potential readers will need to cooperate in unusual ways with the demands on memory or the challenge of interpretation posed by our text, then we can decide that our text, as it stands, is not suitable for the readers to whom it is addressed.

In short, reading research devoted to uncovering reading dynamics makes us aware of the precise way in which any given portion of text presupposes knowledge or expectations which earlier portions of the text may or may not have succeeded in communicating, or presupposes knowledge or experience which the intended readers might not be expected to have. Our work has convinced us that an inquiry into the nature of a text's demands on readers automatically leads inquirers to insights into the linguistic and structural adequacy of that text.