

Writer-Reader Transactions: Defining the Dimensions of Negotiation

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It is my view that there are no voiceless texts, that every message has its source. I perceive the processes in the production and comprehension of texts as involving shared plans — plans based upon the shared beliefs of the participants, writers and readers. Writers, as they compose texts, consider their readers — they consider the transactions in which readers are likely to engage. Readers, as they comprehend texts, respond reflexively and actively to what writers are trying to get them to think or do. In accordance with these notions, I visualize the nature of the writer-reader relationship as involving three overlapping sets of concerns:

1. A set of concerns of writers for what and how the text might be negotiated by readers.
2. A set of concerns of readers for what writers are trying to do; and
3. A second set of concerns of readers for what they as readers need to do (i.e., for purposes of accomplishing a task or achieving an understanding).

With a view toward defining how these concerns constrain writers and readers, I have been involved in a collaborative research project (with P. Cohen) in which we have tried to examine systematically the various facets of the writer-reader relationship by analyzing writing and reading as plan-based speech acts. Specifically, we are trying to define how a contract to effect communication is achieved in light of constraints imposed by (1) the written mode, (2) writers' realizations of their intentions, and (3) readers' interpretations of those intentions. In this paper I place the data generated from this study within a description of a larger study intended to examine the nature of adjustments which pairs of adults made when they were assigned to communicate in various modalities — telephone, teletype, face-to-face conversation, writing, and audio-tape.

During the course of the larger study, we recorded the interactions of the pairs of adults — an expert and a novice — as one adult, the expert, provided instructions to the other adult, the novice, whose task was to assemble a model. The novice was unfamiliar with the model the expert was thoroughly familiar with it and was responsible for providing all the necessary instructions for its operation to the novice. When the expert wrote to the novice, a *think-aloud* procedure provided us access to the intentions of both the participants engaged in the communicative situation. After a brief training period, writers were asked to *think-aloud* about what they were trying to get readers to think or do; likewise,

as readers read the text the writers' produced, they were asked to *finger-point* as well as *think-aloud* about what they believed the author was trying to get them to think or do. We used split-screen videotapes to merge transcripts of (1) the stated intentions of the writers, (2) the texts, and (3) the *think-alouds* of the readers.

As we examined the *think-alouds* of both writers and readers, we were particularly interested in the match and mismatch between them. At various points in the text the match between the writers' *think-alouds* and the readers' *think-alouds* was unusually close: If writers expressed concern for describing an object by a certain attribute (e.g., color), the readers would focus on the same attribute (e.g. color) during their *think-alouds*. This occurred regardless of the other attributes included in the text to describe this same object. Also, both writers and readers understood the function of certain descriptors without the writers' being explicit about their function: Frequently, writers described an object, expecting — but not explicitly cuing — readers to identify, gather, and assemble the object; at other times, when writers identified an object which was not to be assembled, they cued their readers.

At points in the text, the mismatch between writers' and readers' *think-alouds* was apparent: Writers suggested concerns which readers did not focus upon, and readers expressed concerns which writers did not appear to consider. There was also a sense in which the writers' *think-alouds* suggested that at times writers assumed the role of readers. As writers thought-aloud, generated text, and moved to the next set of sub-assembly directions, they would often comment about *the writers' craft* as readers might. There was also a sense in which writers marked their compositions with an "okay" as if the "okay" marked a movement from a turn as reader to a turn as writer. Analyses of the readers' *think-alouds* suggested that the readers often felt frustrated by the writers' failure to explain why they were doing what they were doing. Also the readers were often critical of *the writers' craft*, including writers' choice of words, clarity, and accuracy. There was a sense in which the readers' *think-alouds* assumed a reflexive character as if the readers were rewriting the texts. If one perceived the readers as craftspersons, unwilling to blame their tools for an ineffective product, then one might view the readers as unwilling to let the text provided stand in the way of their successful achievement of their goals or pursuit of understanding.

I believe that texts are written by writers who expect read-

ers to make meaning, and they are read by readers who do the meaning making. I do not view writing as simply sharing information, nor do I view reading as a solitary activity in which the readers' responsibility is just to extract informa-

tion more or less successfully. Writing and reading are multi-dimensional. They involve concurrently complex transactions between writers, writers as readers, readers, and readers as writers.