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ABSTRACT

Because inexperienced or basic writers depend on the semantics of everyday spoken dialogue when writing, research on written composition and the developmental links between spoken and written language should be more accessible to the practitioners who teach writing to those students. A review of the literature supports the theory of a semantic connection between speaking and writing, and a tenth-grade writing sample demonstrates a dependence on the reader's familiarity with a particular sociocultural context for the writing's full semantic value. Teachers who work with unskilled writers should avoid correcting only surface forms and should give students the opportunity to talk through the context-bound aspects of their writing with concerned readers. The interaction of talk and writing is essential to achieving competence for student writers who depend on the semantics of spoken language. (AEA)

SPEAKING AND WRITING: THE SEMANTIC CONNECTION

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SPEAKING AND WRITING: THE SEMANTIC CONNECTION

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In this paper I will share some insights from my research into semantic relationships between speaking and writing. In a series of ongoing investigations, I am examining the influence of spoken language on the construction of meaning with written language as the instrument. My work supports the theoretical assumption that inexperienced or unskilled writers depend on the semantics of everyday spoken dialog when writing. I will illustrate that concept with samples of student writing, and I will explore some implications of that concept for the teaching of writing.

I have two reasons for wanting to do what that opening paragraph proposes. First, my objective is to make research in written composition accessible to practitioners, to teachers of writing, because too often research is inaccessible. My work began when I was teaching secondary English in response to what I saw as semantic abbreviation in much unskilled student writing. Such writing is not full of meaning; rather, it points to situational and cultural contexts of language necessary to understand the writer's meaning. Since my research started in response to a need I felt as a teacher, I am offering some results of my inquiry to other teachers who work with unskilled writers.

Secondly, teachers and researchers need to examine the relationship between speaking and writing because literature concerned with that relationship has often underestimated developmental links between spoken and written language. The literature (such as Shaughnessy, 1977, and Hirsch, 1977) emphasizes differences between those types of discourse and recommends that teachers of writing treat spoken language as the source of errors in student writing and teach the linguistic and logical conventions of written language to eliminate those errors. The assumption is, thus, that speaking and writing are unrelated and counteractive.

Contrary to the assumption that speaking and writing are different and therefore unrelated, I will argue that differences between speaking and writing are the beginning of a close relationship. Because speaking and writing are so dissimilar in the demands each makes on language and logic, writing must be accomplished through the familiar forms and semantic patterns of speech until written language has become familiar enough, through reading and writing practice, to serve as a writer's instrument of thought and communication. If speaking and writing interact during the unskilled writer's writing processes, then the implication for instruction is that speaking and writing ought to be interactive in the composition classroom as well.

Vygotsky (1934/1962 and 1978) provides a theoretical base for understanding speaking and writing as interactive in his concept of a double cognitive abstraction necessary for the production of writing by beginning writers. Unskilled writers must make two abstractions to connect semantic, lexicogrammatical, and orthographic levels of coding (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Meaning must first be constructed in spken language, and spoken language then becomes

the basis for producing written language. Advanced writers have outgrown that dependence on speech. For them, written language more directly symbolizes real or imagined entities and relations, and the mediation of spoken language is less necessary.

In my current research, I am looking for evidence that unskilled writers depend on spoken language while constructing meaning with written language. Foremost among the semantic differences investigators recognize when comparing speaking and writing is the greater degree of context-independence necessary for meaningful writing. The absence of adequately full textual representation, thus, can be taken as an indication of a writer's dependence on speech. Everyday spoken dialog is characterized by collaboration between speaker and interlocutor, by gestural, facial, and intonational supports which contribute to meaning, and by the relative proximity of situational and cultural (Malinowski, 1923) referents for language. Speakers and listeners cooperate in dialog and so does, in a sense, the subject of dialog since that subject is often visible and tacitly shared.

For that reason, the speaker's assumption, that language can be used to indicate or point to unspoken contexts which support and complete the structuring of meaning, works quite well. And because it works for speakers, the same assumption influences the semantics of unskilled writing. What is adequately elaborated meaning in speaking becomes abbreviated meaning in writing, meaning that points to, but does not explicitly represent, contextual referents.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) and Ong (1979) offer useful means to operationally define elements of writing that point away from texts toward contexts of situation and culture. In my research I am using their concepts of exophoric

reference and formularly expressions to compare explanatory essays at three grade levels (4, 8, 12) and to compare weak and strong writing at each of those levels.

By exophoric reference Halliday and Hasan mean features of linguistic texts that refer to elements of the context of situation that surrounds language. They define reference as one form of cohesion which is a semantic tie between a presupposing element of discourse and another element which satisfies or completes the presupposition. Reference can be either endophoric, in which case both the presupposing element and the presupposed element are found within the spoken or written text, or exophoric, in which case the presupposed element is to be found outside of the text. Exophoric references, thus, provide a measure of a writer's tendency to refer to situational contexts. Similarly, Ong's category of formularly expressions provides a measure of writer's tendency to refer to cultural contexts of language. In that category Ong includes commonplaces, cliches, adages, proverbs, and epithets. Ong argues that oral cultures use formularly expressions to record and maintain knowledge through repetition and that participation in the cultural or social group is necessary to understand the semantics of those expressions. Formularly expressions, thus, make reference to cultural or social contexts in order to achieve meaning.

The significance of exophoric references and formularly expressions can be illustrated by referring to this tenth grader's sentence: "One night me and my two friends went to the store." By itself, the sentence does not tell us which night, which friends, or which store. In the text that accompanied the sentence, furthermore, those incomplete meanings, and others, are missing:

One night me and my two friends went to the store than we walked up to the store it was about 9:30. When we got to the pool we stay awhile then we went inside the fence. Then I pushed this boy in the water. then He started chasing me trying to throw me in the water. I started screaming, but he didn't throw me in the water. Then I started walking around the pool then I seen one of my friends flo so I pushed her in the water then her and this boy throw me in then he threw flo in she came in right behind me were soak and wet but we still kept going in the water. Then every one started to leave then I got throw back in the water everytime that I would get out somebody would throw me back in the water. So finally I got out so flo wanted me to walk with her home then we went walking down the street soak and wet. We went right back to the pool got wet again and then we left. As soon as we got to Deberry School it started to rain we were glad because we couldn't go home wet. Our sneakers were soak and wet.

Clearly, the referents for one night, my two friends, and the store are not supplied by the writer. Those items refer to information outside of the text, to information that remains part of the situation surrounding the events in the story. Other references, this boy (lines 4 and 8), he (lines 4 and 5), the pool (lines 2-3, 6 and 14), the fence (line 3) and the street (line 14) fall into the same category. Each of those references is to a particular referent, to an identifiable time, place, person or object, which is not identified or explained. As Halliday and Hasan (p. 36)

point out, it is the implication that further information could be specified that ties a text to a situational context and makes it context-bound. Only once does the writer name one of the participants in her story, flo (lines 7, 8, and 13), and it is that information that makes one of my friends (line 7) an example of endophoric reference. That phrase, like her (lines 7, 8, and 13) and we (lines 9, 13, 14, 15 and 16), refers to information elsewhere in the text to complete the presupposition it contains. In lines 2 and 3, however, we is used in an indirect exophoric manner because it refers back to me and my two friends (line 1) which, in turn, presupposes information that is not in the text.

As the items I have referred to suggest, only those words and phrases that imply that specific referents could be further identified or located, and only personal references (such as I, me, we) and demonstrative references such as this and the), are being counted as exophoric. Thus, where reference is only vague, as in every one (line 10) and somebody (line 11), instances of exophoric reference are not found. It is only with the expectation that further information should be provided, by naming or otherwise identifying, that reference becomes exophoric if the information is not in the text. That expectation is created by my in my two friends (line 1), by this in this boy (lines 4 and 8) and by the in the store (lines 1 and 2), the pool (lines 2-3, 6, and 14) and the street (line 14). My, for example, refers outside of the text in that it implies that the writer has two particular friends in mind. Me and two friends (sic) would be vague but not exophoric as is the case with me and my two friends.

The phrase me and my two friends is also an example of the second category of elements of writing that refer outside of the written text. That

phrase can be identified as a formularly expression, as Ong (1979) defines that term. Given a certain socio-cultural context, such as a neighborhood or peer group, the expression me and my two friends might take on a fuller meaning in that the identities of writer and friends would be clear from the context. A similar expression is the phrase soak and wet (lines 9, 14, and 17) which, again, depends on familiarity with a particular socio-cultural context for its full semantic value.

In discussions of exophoric reference and formularly expressions Halliday and Hasan (1976) and Ong (1979) argue that those forms are characteristic of spoken language within close-knit social groups. The same point has been made by others (see Bernstein, 1975, and Sapir, 1970, for examples). The text of language and its sufficiency of information vary according to the degree to which participants share extra-linguistic contexts. That observation supports the inference that spoken language patterns of representing meaning often lead to semantic abbreviation in student writing. In that interpretation, the writer in the above example is writing as if she were speaking to a close friend, to a person who is just as familiar with the setting and characters in the story as the writer is. Halliday and Hasan describe exophoric reference in spoken language as "neighborhood speech, the language of the children's peer group" (1976, p. 36), and they add that more explicitness would be inappropriate in the language of peer interaction, since that language operates in conjunction with a sharing of situational, experiential, and cultural contexts.

With written language, though, those shared contexts diminish or disappear. Writing for non-intimate others demands a sufficiency of text greater than that necessary for spoken language in family, peer, or neigh-

borhood groups.

Two implications for helping unskilled writers achieve a sufficiency of text in their writing are available in my remarks. First, we should avoid concentrating only on surface forms in the instruction we provide. It is tempting, for example, to change the tenth grade writer's "me and my two friends" to "my two friends and I," hoping that by doing so, the writer will learn something about the correct forms of standard written English. By thus changing the writer's sentence, however, we are making speaking and writing counteractive, not interactive as they are in the writer's composing process. We are looking for an abrupt change from spoken to written language, a change which we actively control and one which the student passively accepts.

Secondly, we should give unskilled writers a chance to talk though context-bound aspects of their writing with concerned readers. What the tenth grade writer in the example I am using needs is a chance to have someone ask for more information, to have a reader come right out and respond to the first sentence by asking "which night, which friends, and which store do you mean?" Thus, the writer will begin to realize where the writing is abbreviated, where the text points to tacit, unshared, and unexplained contexts of meaning. By becoming helpful and concerned readers, we can help unskilled student writers become competent writers. By asking student writers for fuller meanings and by asking individual students to talk about the subjects of their context-bound writing, we make talk and writing interactive in the composition classroom. For student writers who depend on the semantics of spoken language, the interaction of talk and writing is one key to success.

In addition to the works I have referred to in this article, the following selected bibliography lists other key works for teachers and researchers interested in spoken language and the semantics of writing.

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