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## ABSTRACT

Linguistically inclined scholars such as Ragnar Rommetveit and Michael Halliday offer a sociocognitive understanding of writing that challenges current writing theories, which focus attention on processes to the virtual exclusion of the writing product. These linguistic scholars provide ways of understanding context, not as fixed or concrete, but as fluid, interactive and dialectical in its relationship with the reader. They suggest how current theories about the subjectivity of the individual writer might be expanded to take into consideration how writers engage with the reader. Rommetveit, for instance, describes what he calls a "message structure" in writing, through which the writer and reader play out an implicit dialogue. When a writer introduces difficult terminology for the first time, he or she must decide whether or not to define the terms. Such a decision hinges on an implicit understanding between writer and reader. Similarly, according to Halliday, writers create a potential for meaning--both in a private and a shared sense--in so far as they are able to link the texts they create to contexts that bear on their activity. Contexts comprise a complex structure of meaning potential: (1) the kind of symbolic activity writers and readers are involved in; (2) the participant roles of writers and readers; and (3) the role language plays in accomplishing the symbolic activity. Halliday and Rommetveit also offer a means of understanding the complex web of contexts into which students must write themselves. (TB)

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Linguistic Contributions to a Sociocognitive Theory of Writing:  
Mapping Out the Middle Ground of Context and Cognition

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Today I want to talk about some contributions I think a close study of language can provide as the field pursues what I take to be one of its central aims in mapping out an integrated **sociocognitive** theory of writing. By sociocognitive theory I'm thinking specifically of recent (post-1985) work by Linda Flower and her colleagues at the Center for the Study of Writing (Flower, 1989; Flower, Stein, Ackerman, Kantz, McCormick, & Peck, 1990; Freedman, Dyson, Flower, & Chafe, 1987), who I think were the first to try to lay out the aims of sociocognitive theory in a systematic way. Very briefly, I would gloss sociocognitive theory as a culmination of converging but often contentious developments in the field over the last 30 years, where the cognitive process approach that focused writing scholarship during the 70s and early 80s was increasingly confronted by scholars who wanted to recast the writing process in a very different light by emphasizing the importance of sociocultural and interactional contexts of writing over individual cognition. Efforts after sociocognitive theory reflect the field's growing recognition that we need to fashion some principled rapprochement of these views (Nystrand, Greene, & Wiemelt, 1993).

By now it's become something of a commonplace among scholars working along these lines to contend that writing is **both** a cognitive **and** a social process, that context and cognition operate in a kind of dialectal relationship, or as Linda Flower puts it, that "context cues cognition, which in its turn mediates and interprets the particular world that context provides" (1989, p. 282). You'll note, though, in this particular formulation of Flower's--what we might call a first axiom of sociocognitive theory--that it expresses **no obvious concern for issues of language and textuality**. And I want to suggest today that this omission is symptomatic of the field generally, at least in this country. We can contrast our own situation, I think, with what's happening in say the UK or Australia, where a close concern for language is more central and the influence of linguistics on writing scholarship is more prominent.

Given the fairly strong early connections of composition studies to linguistic scholarship during the late 60s and 70s, it seems rather odd to me that today many American compositionists appear so largely ambivalent about the role of language and textuality in their accounts of writing and writing development. Now I **do not** mean to say that a focused concern for language has been missing entirely--that's obviously not true at all, and I might cite any number of scholars whose research has drawn extensively from linguistics and discourse theory. Poststructuralist scholars in particular have noted the pervasive influence of discourse--though in a very general sense, I think--on how writers and readers construct a sense of self and the world. I **do** mean to say, however, that a more focused concern for language--that is, for linguistic and textual structure--is no longer **central** to how the field as a whole conceptualizes writing, at least in this country; focused concerns for language no longer organize writing scholarship in the same way that our continuing interests in context and cognition do, and linguistic methodologies are no longer on par with those derived from cognitive psychology or cultural studies in writing scholarship. I'm suggesting, then, that as things stand currently, a close concern for language and the use of linguistic methodologies seem at best marginalized within the field. While I don't have

time here to offer much evidence for this claim--and I think it's fairly indisputable anyway--I'll say very quickly that you can imagine my considerable dismay last Spring when, having written my proposal for this talk on linguistic contributions to writing theory, I was then confronted by the need to select an appropriate "area cluster" from the proposal guidelines that would situate my topic appropriately. Of the 14 main cluster headings and 59 subheadings provided, the topics of language and textuality and linguistic or discourse methodologies are, to me at least, conspicuous in their absence.

So, what accounts for this diminished influence of linguistics and close language study in writing scholarship in this country? I think one compelling account of the breach can be found in the focused efforts of compositionists to achieve new disciplinary status in a context of intense institutional change and development during the late 60s and 70s. Louise Phelps (1988)--who I'll borrow from at length for the next couple of minutes--speculates that it was in the charged political climate of this time that compositionists developed the very effective strategy of juxtaposing the terminological pair "**process vs. product**" as a means of: (1) challenging the assumptions and practices of the prevailing paradigm, which they associated with an abiding interest in the written product; and (2) laying the conceptual foundations for a new tradition by aligning themselves with process oriented interests being pursued in an emerging science of cognitive psychology. Very soon, of course, the "process vs. product" slogan had ascended to the level of "revealed truth" in writing scholarship. Process became the new **root metaphor** that organized the emerging discipline and defined its epistemology; it reshaped the kinds of questions to be asked, the types of methods to use, and the kinds of data to analyze. And in increasing numbers of classrooms it revolutionized how writing was taught and evaluated.

This success, however, was purchased at some considerable costs, for the traditional concern for "writing as product" was not merely compensated for by the new process view, it was rejected outright. Phelps explains that the juxtaposition of process vs. product "created a vocabulary of discontinuity, emphasizing distinctions and oppositions over connections....[and that its] inherently polarizing thrust tend[ed] to exclude texts from the sphere of process by reducing them to traces of the writer's cognitive activity" (161). So for compositionists the written product became by and large simply "uninteresting."

This "process revolution" in writing scholarship has been celebrated by some as the first stages of a kind of Kuhnian (19##) paradigm shift (Emig, 1980; Hairston, 1982; Young, 1978). And while it may indeed be the case that current efforts at building an integrated sociocognitive theory represent the culmination of this basic shift, more cautious voices have warned that talk of a new "process paradigm" is premature and perhaps even problematic. Phelps (1988) argues, for example, that any talk about a new paradigm necessarily awaits a reconfiguration of the very process/product dualism that's given composition studies its shape over the last 30 years, a reconfiguration that depends as well on a newly defined role for language and textuality in writing scholarship and practice. New paradigms cannot simply reject old concerns out of hand, but rather must find ways to account for those old concerns from a new point of view. If Phelps is right that a new paradigm will need to account for the role of texts in the writing process, and I think she is, then clearly we've not yet reached our goal. A theory of writing, especially a sociocognitive theory as it seeks to map out some middle ground between context and cognition, requires a theory of language and textuality, and a process approach--defined either cognitively or socially--needs to deal with the problem of linguistic form. So if we're ever to gain a more comprehensive, sociocognitive perspective on writing, then we'll need to develop our concepts, as Phelps puts it, "on the principle of integrating text and process at all levels of analysis" (p. 160).

So this is the problem I'm posing today. What can it mean to integrate process and text at all levels of analysis in the face of a dominant frame of understanding that defines the two as conceptual opposites, or that even in the best cases tends to see the written product as some kind of unproblematic

output of much more complex underlying cognitive and social processes? How can we get beyond this basic conceptual impasse?

I want to lean on Louise Phelps for just a bit longer here. Phelps proposes that we need a new root metaphor to organize our thinking about writing, one that not only integrates a focused concern for language and textuality, but also one that problematizes our current conceptions of the writing process. The prevailing process metaphor is rooted in presumptions about the individual subjectivities of writers and their unmediated access to contexts as objectified "social facts." In this frame of understanding, written texts are treated unproblematically as "autonomous meaning-objects." A new root metaphor, however, might challenge these conceptions by locating context and cognition itself squarely within the unfolding intersubjective experience of writers and readers mediated by texts.

When our conception of writing is extended from the private thoughts and behaviors of individual writers and readers to the intersubjective experiences that unfold between them, our notions of process and product require redefinition, and the relationship between them changes radically. We begin to see process as a collaborative enterprise, where writers and readers work together to negotiate a common grounds for understanding in linguistically mediated interaction. Our focus shifts from individual cognition and "concrete writing contexts" to the ways writers and readers use texts to generate and sustain a shared public sense of discourse situations. In other words, we no longer analyze the contexts of writing as objective "social facts" that writers need to size up once and for all, and then respond to, but as themselves the emergent, ongoing accomplishments of strategic language processes. Our new root metaphor, then, might talk not so much of writing contexts, but of linguistic processes of contextualization.

Now I want to try to be very clear about the claim I'm making here. It's often the case when talk of writing turns to metaphors like "negotiation" and "collaboration," that some will object to the "hopeful delusions" of cooperation and equity that seem implicit in this kind of talk. Some will argue that it's not such a perfect world after all, and that discourse--perhaps especially written discourse, because of its frequently strong institutional and ideological motivations and sanctions--is always rife with asymmetries, inequities, and ideological consequences. We use discourse not just to cooperate, they object, but also to dominate and coerce. And I agree. But the point I'm trying to make here is a rather different one. Even dominance and coercion in discourse require a more fundamental grounds of mutual understanding, a common frame of reference based on at least partially shared solutions to very basic questions like **what's going on** and **who's involved** in a discourse. I'm suggesting here that the intersubjective experiences of writing and reading emerge from these commonly held contextual grounds for understanding--common perspectives on how to get on with the interactive work of writing and reading--which are themselves an ongoing accomplishment of discursive processes.

Scholars in other disciplines have for some time now looked at some of the ways texts work to mediate context and cognition in discourse, and I think the linguistically grounded methodologies they use can make important contributions to our own aims of building an integrated sociocognitive theory of writing. Much of this work approaches problems of cognition and shared understanding by analyzing the ways conversants use the language they produce to make sense of and account for the contexts that frame their discourse. In these studies contexts are analyzed as emergent frames of interaction that permeate linguistic and textual structure to provide resources for shared understandings. To say, in this way, that discourse contexts are not the objectified "social facts" posited by the mainstream rhetorical tradition does not mean, however, that contexts are subjective and indeterministic. Rather, these analyses work from the linguistically accountable point of view of the conversants themselves. Of all the many possible contexts that might be attributed to a sample of written discourse, in other words, it may be the



case that the contexts that count most are the ones a writer and reader demonstrably orient to in the language they share between them. A writer accounts for this orientation to context in the strategic language choices she makes, and she communicates to the extent that her readers rely on the textual cues she provides to share this orientation.

Now I'll try to make this talk of "contextualizing language features" just a bit more concrete by quickly reviewing how it's played out in the work of a couple of the more familiar sources. Norwegian social psychologist Ragnar Rommetveit (1974, 1992), for example, analyzes these contextual orientations--what we might call the **emergent** "social facts"--of discourse as the ongoing accomplishments of conversants working together to map out a mutually shared grounds for understanding. This grounds of mutual understanding is manifest in what Rommetveit calls the **message structure** of a discourse. And in the case of writing, message structure plays out in the form of an implicit writer-reader dialogue, where one proposition both "responds," as it were, to a presumed reader's anticipated reaction to prior propositions, as well as sets the stage for the sequencing of subsequent propositional material. So for example, when a writer introduces some difficult terminology for the first time in a text, he's then faced with a choice: Does he define the term and offer examples, or does he presume adequate knowledge on the part of the reader and just move on? The choice a writer makes both reflects the context of the discourse **and** defines it. When an expert reader finds the term followed by definitions and examples, she recognizes the context as one that may not be particularly productive for her more experienced needs. The basic contextual grounds for understanding, in other words, are not encoded in propositional structures, which for Rommetveit only carry a "semantic potential," but rather emerge in the more dynamic structuring processes of discourse as a mode of interaction and exchange. So our emergent sense of writing contexts represents a kind of unfolding map that orients us as writers and readers in the joint work of what Rommetveit calls "perspective fixation." It is this shared goal of fixing a common perspective that motivates and sustains writing and reading in the first place. We talk and write in order to comprehend and make tangible our experience of the world and to engage others in that experience. Discourse gives us the capacity to shape and reshape that experience in privately and publicly accountable ways.

Like Rommetveit, linguist Michael Halliday (1978, 1985) also looks at the ways conversants use language as a resource for structuring and organizing discourse contexts. For Halliday, our sense of the world around us is shaped by the patterns of language interaction we engage in. This is possible because the texts we create are organized functionally with respect to their contexts of use. Halliday explains that "the relation between text and context is a dialectical one; the text creates the context as much as the context creates the text. 'Meaning' arises from the friction between the two" (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). In Halliday's view, writers create a potential for meaning--both in a private and a shared, public sense--in so far as they are able to link the texts they create to the contexts that bear on their activity. According to Halliday, the contexts of writing comprise a complex structure of meaning potential involving: (1) the kind of symbolic activity in which writers and readers are engaged, including the subject matter of the discourse; (2) the participant role relations of the writers and readers involved in the activity; and (3) the role language itself plays in accomplishing that symbolic activity. So for example, my preparations for this talk had to take account of a very different set of contextual circumstances than, say, my writing an informal memo to some of my graduate school colleagues about our Friday night review sessions, different in terms of the kind of symbolic action and subject matter each entails, in the kinds of interpersonal role relations involved, and in the role my texts play in accomplishing each. Likewise, the language and texts writers use to negotiate and account for the complex contextual structures of a discourse comprise a corresponding structure of semantic functions. These semantic functions are evident in the transitivity structures of a text, the mood system, modality, thematization, and so on. This functional correspondence allows writers and readers to make predictions and draw inferences about texts

and their contexts, one from the other. So we can "read" the situation from features of the two texts.

To sum up, I'm suggesting that linguistically inclined scholars like Rommetveit and Halliday--and we could also talk about work being done in other related frameworks, including ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, structuration theory, activity theory, and more--show us how sociocognitive theory might move beyond current process approaches that describe texts as finished products, contexts as concrete "social facts," and the cognitive processes of writing as reflections of the individual subjectivities of writers and readers. While we need not reject the felt "naturalness" of those descriptions, they show us how we might ground those impressions in the more dynamic **intersubjective processes** of writer-reader interactions mediated by texts. This move requires a basic reconceptualization of our foundational notions of written text as the simple output of complex cognitive and processes to one of text as process. It requires a new view of texts as dynamic sites of interactive language activity, as dialogic spaces shaped by ongoing, negotiated understandings of **what's going on** and **who's involved** in a piece of writing. And it requires us to recognize how texts work to account for and sustain the rational grounds of that interaction as a sense-making social practice.

Linguistically grounded scholars like Halliday and Rommetveit also show us new ways to conceptualize context and cognition in writing and the relationship between them. They demonstrate that the contexts instantiated in written discourse are themselves highly complex, multi-dimensional, interpenetrating, and dynamic. Discourse--especially the institutional discourse surrounding school writing activities--is wrought with the tension of multiple, simultaneous, and often competing contexts of interaction, where developing writers must also play the complementary and sometimes contrary roles of being a good student and trusted peer. They show us how those contexts can be understood not simply as the objective "social facts" of a rhetorical problem, but also as themselves the emergent accomplishments of discourse processes. Such a view allows us to rethink revision, for example, not as a writer's efforts to "get things right" with respect to some already determined rhetorical context--the view of classical rhetoric--but to make ongoing linguistically accountable sense of the complex range of circumstances that bear on and shape her writing. Finally, their linguistically grounded analyses demonstrate the irreducible mutuality of private and public operations in language and thinking. They show, for example, how the text a writer composes works to account for that writer's thinking about the contexts of his writing, as well as sustains those contextual understandings such that he might continue to write. Moreover, they show how these processes of contextualization connect our private composing processes to the more public processes of written communication; they show how texts mediate the interests of writers and readers such that they can be said to **share** a common sense of the circumstances that shape the mutually oriented work of writing and reading.