3

Text and discourse

The nature of text

When we think of a **text**, we typically think of a stretch of language complete in itself and of some considerable extent: a business letter, a leaflet, a news report, a recipe, and so on. However, though this view of texts may be commonsensical, there appears to be a problem when we have to define units of language which consist of a single sentence, or even a single word, which are all the same experienced as texts because they fulfil the basic requirement of forming a meaningful whole in their own right. Typical examples of such small-scale texts are public notices like 'KEEP OFF THE GRASS', 'KEEP LEFT', 'KEEP OUT', 'DANGER', 'RAMP AHEAD', 'SLOW', and 'EXIT'.

It is obvious that these minimal texts are meaningful in themselves, and therefore do not need a particular structural patterning with other language units. In other words, they are complete in terms of communicative meaning. So, if the meaningfulness of texts does not depend on their linguistic size, what else does it depend on?

Consider the road sign 'RAMP AHEAD'. When you are driving a car and see this sign, you interpret it as a warning that there will be a small hump on the road ahead of you and that it is therefore wise to slow down when you drive over it. From this it follows that you recognize a piece of language as a text, not because of its length, but because of its location in a particular context. And if you are familiar with the text in that context, you know what the message is intended to be.

But now suppose you see the same road sign in the collection of a souvenir-hunter! Of course, you still know the original meaning

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of the sign, but because of its dissociation from its ordinary context of traffic control, you are no longer able to act on its original intention. Furthermore, prompted by its alien situational context, you might be tempted to think up some odd meaning for the otherwise familiar sign, particularly when you see it in relation to other 'souvenirs' in the collection. (Needless to say, this is probably exactly what the souvenir-hunter wants you to do.) From this example of alienation of context we can then conclude that, for the expression of its meaning, a text is dependent on its use in an appropriate context.

The nature of discourse

We may go even further and assert that the meaning of a text does not come into being until it is actively employed in a context of use. This process of activation of a text by relating it to a context of use is what we call **discourse**. To put it differently, this contextualization of a text is actually the reader's (and in the case of spoken text, the hearer's) reconstruction of the writer's (or speaker's) intended message, that is, his or her communicative act or discourse. In these terms, the text is the observable product of the writer's or speaker's discourse, which in turn must be seen as the process that has created it. Clearly, the observability of a text is a matter of degree: for example, it may be in some written form, or in the form of a sound recording, or it may be unrecorded speech. But in whatever form it comes, a reader (or hearer) will search the text for cues or signals that may help to reconstruct the writer's (or speaker's) discourse. However, just because he or she is engaged in a process of reconstruction, it is always possible that the reader (or hearer) infers a different discourse from the text than the one the writer (or speaker) had intended. Therefore, one might also say that the inference of discourse meaning is largely a matter of negotiation between writer (speaker) and reader (hearer) in a contextualized social interaction.

So we can suggest that a text can be realized by any piece of language as long as it is found to record a meaningful discourse when it is related to a suitable context of use.

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Textual and contextual meaning

At this point, it will have become clear that in order to derive a discourse from a text we have to explore two different sites of meaning: on the one hand, the text's intrinsic linguistic or formal properties (its sounds, typography, vocabulary, grammar, and so on) and on the other hand, the extrinsic contextual factors which are taken to affect its linguistic meaning. These two interacting sites of meaning are the concern of two fields of study: **semantics** is the study of formal meanings as they are encoded in the language of texts, that is, independent of writers (speakers) and readers (hearers) set in a particular context, while **pragmatics** is concerned with the meaning of language in discourse, that is, when it is used in an appropriate context to achieve particular aims. Pragmatic meaning is not, we should note, an alternative to semantic meaning, but complementary to it, because it is inferred from the interplay of semantic meaning with context.

The notion of **context** has already been introduced, if somewhat informally, in the previous chapters. We now need to be more precise. It will be recalled that we distinguished two kinds of context: an internal linguistic context built up by the language patterns inside the text, and an external non-linguistic context drawing us to ideas and experiences in the world outside the text. The latter is a very complex notion because it may include any number of text-external features influencing the interpretation of a discourse. Perhaps we can make the notion more manageable by specifying the following components (obviously, the list is by no means complete):

1. the text type, or genre (for example, an election poster, a recipe, a sermon)
2. its topic, purpose, and function
3. the immediate temporary and physical setting of the text
4. the text's wider social, cultural, and historical setting
5. the identities, knowledge, emotions, abilities, beliefs, and assumptions of the writer (speaker) and reader (hearer)
6. the relationships holding between the writer (speaker) and reader (hearer)
7. the association with other similar or related text types (intertextuality)

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The headline revisited

Let us now try to put these ideas to work by reconsidering our analysis of the newspaper headline 'Life on Mars—war of the words', which we examined in Chapter 1.

When we analysed the headline's stylistic make-up and interpreted its effects, we did so from a double-focused perspective which corresponds to the distinctions just outlined. First we pointed out how the headline writer had exploited the resources of language. To that end we recorded the foregrounded choices which the writer had made from the following elements of the linguistic system: typography (a larger and bolder typeface; the use of a dash in a conspicuous place), sounds and rhythm (alliteration and a balanced stress pattern), grammar and structure (elliptical sentence and two balanced phrases of the same structure), and vocabulary (for example, 'war of words' instead of 'debate', 'dispute', or 'quarrel'). At that stage of our analysis, we were adopting a semantic perspective, that is, we registered these choices as having been made from the linguistic system. In brief, we treated the headline as text.

Next we shifted to a pragmatic perspective by making the point that most of these striking linguistic choices are inevitably motivated by the socio-cultural situation the writer is working in, namely the hectic world of a British national newspaper and its readers. Though only selectively, we indicated some of the contextual factors that are very likely to have influenced the writer's discourse and therewith the text, that is, the medium of his or her discourse. In fact, one might try to tick off the situational features we suggested against the items (1) through (7) on the above list of potential text-external features. Clearly, this move to the world outside the text enabled us to examine the headline's marked linguistic forms in terms of their pragmatic or communicative use, in other words, as a resource to reconstruct the headline writer's discourse. Putting the headline's text into relation with its context also enabled us to express some evaluative judgements about the possible (perhaps intended) effects of the headline writer's foregrounded linguistic choices such as its succinct and pungent style, its direct and powerful effect on the reader and, last but not least, its intertextual allusion. Obviously, these are stylistic and not lin-

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guistic judgements, which can only be made, as we have just seen, by relating the linguistic forms of the text to a relevant context of use, that is, by treating it as discourse.

In this connection, the intertextual allusion in the headline is an interesting example of the possibility that some of the newspaper's readers might miss the pun and thereby derive another discourse from the text than the one the writer intended.

The context of literary discourse

But what of literary texts of the kind discussed in Chapter 2? How are these points about text, context, and discourse relevant to them? In principle, the process of discourse inferencing is the same for non-literary and literary texts, for in either case we have to bring about an interaction between the semantic meanings of the linguistic items of the text and the pragmatic meanings these items take on in a context of use. However, as we argued in Chapter 2, the nature of the context of *literary discourse* is quite different from that of non-literary discourse in that it is dissociated from the immediacy of social contact. In very broad terms, whereas the non-literary text makes a connection with the context of our everyday social practice, the literary text does not: it is self-enclosed.

Now, the discourse of daily social life is, of necessity, constantly aimed at the control, categorization, and abstraction of an endless variety of social institutions, relationships, and processes. In fact, the very term 'society' is a prime example of how far we can go in our habitual urge to abstraction! But we also hold dear an altogether different urge, namely the desire to be an individual, to be distinct from others, though realizing at the same time that we are indivisible members of society. It is literature, and in a broad sense all art, which can be said to potentially provide an outlet for these individualizing tendencies. In the case of literature, this escape exists because its discourse is divorced from the context of the social practice we have just described. To put it differently, literary discourse represents a world that refuses to be categorized and pigeon-holed, unlike the social world we live in. It is essential to recognize, however, that the alternative realities represented by literary discourses do not offer a neat and tidy substitute for the

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realities which we are in the habit of constructing as members of a society. The meanings of *literary* discourses are indefinite, undetermined, unstable, and indeed often unsettling. So every time we try to infer a discourse from the same literary text, we are sure to find other meanings, which again and again will refuse to be pinned down, and may therefore open up a refreshing perspective in addition to our socialized certainties. It is here that Nietzsche's dictum comes to mind 'We have Art in order that we may not perish from Truth'.

All this does not mean, of course, that literary texts bear no relation to the 'real world'. Of course they do, otherwise we would not be able to identify with them and construe some meaningful discourse. The point is that their characteristic use of language, unlike that of non-literary texts, challenges our socializing tendency to align ourselves with abstractions and generalizing concepts. Indeed, literary language brings about this challenge by stressing and, what is even more important, by preserving the particular. Paradoxically, this unique 'verbal pickling' of the particular, to borrow a phrase from Philip Larkin, nevertheless invites or tempts us to look for some broader significance. But, for reasons explained above, we do not socialize this wider meaning, so that it remains inherently individual and thereby always divergent.

The communicative situation in literary discourse

Essentially, I have argued, a discourse is a context-bound act of communication verbalized in a text, and waiting to be inferred from it. Such a communicative act is inherently an interpersonal activity between two parties: the first-person party at the addresser end of the process, and the second-person party at the addressee end. These parties may share a physical context, as in face-to-face conversation, or may not, as in written discourse. But as we have noted, context is not simply a matter of physical circumstances but of the ideas, values, beliefs, and so on inside people's heads. In this sense all communication is a meeting of minds, and meaning is achieved to the extent that the contexts of the two parties come together.

But in literature the communicative situation is not so straightforward. Since, as we have argued, literary texts are disconnected

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from ordinary social practices, there is a disruption in the direct line of communication between the parties. Thus the first-person pronoun does not represent the person who produced the text but a persona within it, and so we cannot as readers converge on the writer's context but only on that which is internally created in the text itself. And this context may represent not one perspective or point of view, but several.

Let us now illustrate this diversity of perspectives by considering a poem. The author is John Betjeman, and in this respect he is the first-person producer of the text. But whose perspective is represented inside it?

Devonshire Street W.1

The heavy mahogany door with its wrought-iron screen
    Shuts. And the sound is rich, sympathetic, discreet.
The sun still shines on this eighteenth-century scene
    With Edwardian faience adornments—Devonshire Street.

5 No hope. And the X-ray photographs under his arm
    Confirm the message. His wife stands timidly by.
The opposite brick-built house looks lofty and calm
    Its chimneys steady against a mackerel sky.

No hope. And the iron nob of this palisade
10   So cold to the touch, is luckier now than he.
'Oh merciless, hurrying Londoners! Why was I made
    For the long and the painful deathbed coming to me?'

She puts her fingers in his as, loving and silly,
    At long-past Kensington dances she used to do
15 'It's cheaper to take the tube to Piccadilly
    And then we can catch a nineteen or a twenty-two.'

We might note, first of all, that the scene here is described in third-person terms ('his arm', 'his wife', 'he', 'she') and this presupposes a first-person perspective. The man's plight is related with apparent detachment from the point of view of an uninvolved omniscient narrator, but his or her position is never made explicit by the use of a first-person pronoun: he or she remains an unidentifiable voice. The only times the first-person pronoun makes an appearance are in the **direct speech** of the man (lines 11–12)

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and of his wife (lines 15–16). But the perspective is different in each case. The wife makes use of the plural 'we' and so speaks on behalf of both of them. The man uses the singular 'I', and although it is *presented* as direct speech, it clearly represents not what he says but what he thinks: it is interior monologue. And of course what the wife says and what he thinks relate to two entirely different realities: the simple and trivial everyday life of the present they can share, and the dreadful agony of the future that they cannot.

So we can discern three perspectives here: that of the man, his wife, and a detached observer. But on closer consideration, things are not so simple. How detached, after all, is the description of the scene here? We might note, for example, that it is heavy with detail. The things described are linguistically realized by rather complex noun phrases, some of which are overloaded with adjectives and other types of modifying elements. In the following list, the head nouns of the noun phrases are in capitals, while the determiners ('the', 'this', 'its'), adjectives (for example 'heavy', 'mahogany'), and other descriptive structures (for example 'with its wrought-iron screen') are in italics:

the heavy mahogany DOOR *with its wrought-iron screen*
the eighteenth-century SCENE *with Edwardian faience adornments—Devonshire Street*
the opposite brick-built HOUSE
its CHIMNEYS *steady against a mackerel sky*
the iron NOB *of this palisade so cold to the touch*

It should be noted that these complex structures in themselves are just linguistic features, which do not go beyond the status of *textual* data. But, as suggested earlier, we take it that they are designed to have *discourse* significance and so to reflect perspective. The very fact of linguistic elaboration here implies a heightened perception of detail. Who then, we might reasonably ask, would perceive these things in such a way? There would be no motivation for the detached observer to do so, but there would be for somebody who has effectively just received a death sentence. So what we have here, we might infer, is the condemned man's first-person perspective on reality. It would seem that from the moment he leaves the specialist's surgery, his perceiving senses are in a state of high alert: aural ('The heavy mahogany door…

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shuts. . . . the sound. . .'), visual ('The sun still shines. . . adornments. . .', 'The. . . house looks lofty. . . a mackerel sky'), and tactile ('So cold to the touch').

Of course, we might interpret this detailed awareness in different ways. Perhaps it intimates the acute sensitivity and heightened activity of the senses of someone who knows he is going to die, and therefore now takes in everything around him in a world he is soon going to leave. Or we may interpret it as suggesting that the man unconsciously transfers his feelings to these external objects by contrasting their apparent invulnerability with his own mortality. Indeed, the solidity and permanence of the things he perceives are implied by many of their endurable aspects: the door is made of 'heavy mahogany' and it is provided with a 'wrought-iron screen'; the scene is 'eighteenth-century' and it features 'Edwardian faience' (a kind of glazed brick) adornments; the house opposite is 'brick-built' and looks 'lofty and calm'; its chimneys look 'steady'; and the nob of the palisade is made of 'iron'. The doomed patient, we might suggest, seems to be overpowered by the solidity and agelessness of these lifeless objects, which ironically emphasize the fragility of his own life and that of human life in general.

And this assignment of discourse significance might draw our attention back to the text and to other linguistic features. For example, there is another conspicuous pattern of linguistic structures in which nouns denoting lifeless objects function either as the subject of action verbs (the 'door shuts', the 'sun shines', and the 'X-ray photographs confirm' the message) or as the subject of copular verbs linked with one or more adjectives denoting human features (the sound is 'rich, sympathetic, discreet', the 'house looks lofty and calm', its 'chimneys [look] steady', and the 'nob. . . is luckier' than he). Obviously, in itself the clause 'the sun still shines' is unremarkable, a standard phrase, but it clearly fits and reinforces this pattern of linguistic structures describing lifeless things as active and sentient. And it is worth noticing that the very fact that the expression is normal, even banal, suggests the continuity of ordinary and accepted things in spite of the man's personal agony.

In the context of the poem we may construe these structures pragmatically as a further indication that we are to infer the

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man's anxieties and insecurity from the way he perceives the things around him. In fact, it appears that he experiences his surroundings as animated, which implies that lifeless objects are personified. Things are given human attributes in that they are endowed with the power to act by themselves and they are given a consciousness and the human capacity to feel.

By contrast, the ill-fated man is subject of only two verbs. Significantly, both times this is in a context where he is not in control of the situation: in the bitterly ironic comparative clause 'And the iron nob of this palisade...is luckier now *than he [is]*', and in the emotional passive structure 'Why *was I made* for the long and the painful deathbed coming to me?' Obviously, the man thinks he has fallen victim to uncontrollable forces and no longer feels able to perform any action which could change his dreadful situation. In the same way, his wife is made the grammatical subject of helpless actions: 'His wife stands timidly by', and 'She puts her fingers in his as, loving and silly, ...she used to do'.

And again, this inferring of discourse significance might lead us back to the text to see what other textual features might support our interpretation. We might note that there is a consistent use of the simple present tense in the description of the man's perceptions ('the door...*shuts*', 'the sound *is* rich', and 'the X-ray photographs...*confirm* the message'). The use of this tense locates the events in the present, though of course in normal referential terms they cannot be. This gives a perspective of immediacy to the man's experience. His perceptions and his feelings are actual, here and now, not distanced in any past-tense narrative. And the reader of course is drawn into this reality and given a sense of sharing in the immediacy of this contextual present.

Another textual feature which contributes to this effect is the frequent use of the definite article (for example '*the* door', '*the* sound', '*the* X-ray photographs', '*the* message'). The definite article would normally signify a contextual convergence: it specifies something the speaker and the person spoken to both know about. The sick man knows about these things well enough but the reader of course does not, so in normal referential terms the use of the article is not warranted. Its use here, therefore, can be said to confirm that it is the man's perspective on things which is dominant, but also to draw the reader into sharing it.

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Conclusion

We have attempted to delineate what might be called a 'communicative triangle', encompassing a first-person party (an addresser), a text as the material manifestation of a discourse, and a second-person party (an addressee). All three are indispensable elements in a dynamic contextualized interaction. It is convenient to talk about text, when our analysis is focused on the intrinsic linguistic properties of the text, without considering its contextual factors. On the other hand, we need the term discourse when our analysis is not only concerned with linguistic features, but also with non-linguistic aspects such as the extra-textual context of communication in which the discourse is situated. In this sense, the term discourse takes text and context together because they are seen as interacting generators of meaning.

Literature is distinctive, I have suggested, because its texts are closed off from normal external contextual connection and this means that we need to infer possible contextual implications, including perspective or point of view, from the textual features themselves. I have illustrated how this works by reference to a poem. But questions of perspective and the variable representation of reality are just as relevant to prose fiction, and that is what we shall turn to in the next chapter.

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