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Linguistic Insights
Studies in Language and Communication

Nicola T. Owtram

The Pragmatics of Academic Writing

A Relevance Approach to
the Analysis of
Research Article Introductions

Peter Lang

This volume investigates to what extent existing approaches to pragmatics and discourse shed light on how the form of a text creates stylistic effects. Taking a cross-cultural perspective, this book focuses on five key stylistic features of writing – paragraph structure, length and construction of sentences, organisation of information in sentences, relative formality of vocabulary, amount of nominalisation – widely seen as partly responsible for the different impressions created by academic writing in English and Italian. The author develops a theoretical framework for the investigation of intuitions about stylistic differences from a contrastive point of view. To this end, the book gives an overview of recent scholarly approaches to writing and reading, genre studies, contrastive rhetoric and the notions of style and stylistics, together with an assessment of several individual approaches.

Nicola T. Owtram is head of the Language Centre at the European University Institute in Florence, where she teaches English for Academic Purposes. She holds a PhD in Linguistics from University College, London. Her research interests lie in the fields of academic writing, comparative stylistics, and cognitive pragmatics.

The Pragmatics of Academic Writing



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1. Introduction:

Five areas of cross-cultural variation

Italian Language (Essay Title No.1): The figure of Carducci stands out in the poetic panorama of his time, reclaiming the classic Italian tradition in a cultured and impassioned re-visitation that he enhances through lively and contemporary poetic stimuli, contemporaneously opening the path to new elements that anticipate some of the most important eighteenth-century poetry in a pattern that, while respecting the great Italian lyrical patrimony, does not avoid opening itself up to new European influences, maintaining his own originality, without renouncing – indeed, giving new life – to the themes that were fundamental to the great past of the classical world and the dawn of the social and artistic modernity marking contemporary linguistic complexity. Put a cross if you agree: Yes No. (Benni 2001: 85)⁵

I have chosen to begin with this small bit of satire because it seems to me to illustrate the complexity of Italian academic style very persuasively. Although it is probably not fair to say that all Italian academic writing is as impenetrable as this, that it can be satirised so powerfully and effectively is a good starting point for discussing the sorts of questions that I want to answer in this study.

The work presented here has been triggered to a great extent by my teaching over the last few years in a small international research

1 [Tema d'italiano 1. La figura di Carducci si staglia imponente nel panorama poetico del suo tempo riprendendo la tradizione classica italiana in una rivisitazione colta e appassionata che egli arricchisce degli stimoli poetici più vivi e contemporanei, aprendo contemporaneamente la strada a fermenti nuovi che anticipano alcune delle tendenze più significative della poesia novecentesca in un disegno che pur rispettando il grande patrimonio lirico italiano non tralascia di aprirsi alle nuove suggestioni europee mantenendo una sua cifra originale senza rinunciare a riflettere, vivificandoli, sui temi fondamentali di quella poesia che riassume il grande passato della parola classica e l'alba della modernità sociale e artistica della complessità linguistica contemporanea. Segnare con una crocetta se siete d'accordo: Sì No.] (All translations in this volume are my own, unless otherwise specified.)

institute in Florence, Italy. The courses I teach involve training non-native writers of English to deal competently and critically with the rhetorical models and strategies typical of native writers of English academic texts, in order to help them produce their own seminar papers, articles and – eventually – doctoral theses in English. These students come from all over the world, but a particularly large group is made up of Italian non-native speakers of English.

One day a group of Italian students and I were talking about the structuring of English writing and they commented that they would never put text together in the way that an English writer does. One aspect they mentioned was the way in which ideas are introduced and then referred to again in discourse. They also observed that English seems so much easier to read than Italian; indeed, sometimes the ideas expressed can seem over-simple and elementary to the reader.²

These observations provide the starting point for this work (Coffey/Atkinson 1996: 5). They are very widespread among people who are familiar with both languages and are confirmed by a number of open-ended, in-depth interviews (Weiss 1994) that I carried out with Italian academics who, for publishing reasons, need to write in English (translators who work from Italian into English painted a similar picture (Zauberga 2001)). My interviewees all unanimously stated that writers of English texts structure and express their ideas in ways that are much simpler than their Italian counterparts, the result being what some of them referred to as greater ‘density’ and others as ‘more work’ to be done by the reader of the Italian texts. Among the stylistic differences identified by interviewees as contributing to this impression were differences between the two languages in (1) the length and organisation of paragraphs, (2) the length and construction (e.g. subordination and co-ordination) of sentences, (3) the organisation of information within the sentence, (4) the relative formality of the vocabulary used (e.g. ‘purchase’ versus ‘buy’), and (5) the amount of nominalisation felt to be

2 I assume that writers (communicators, etc.) are female and readers (addressees, etc.) are male.

acceptable (e.g. ‘His departure bothered Mary’ versus ‘He left, which bothered Mary’).

To illustrate these differences, let us look briefly at one Italian and one English example in each of these categories. The texts that will be referred to here may be found in Appendix A; they consist in excerpts from articles from refereed history journals in Italian and English (respectively, *Quaderni Storici* and *Past and Present*) and have been selected in order to highlight the typical features that will be the focus of this study.³

Let us start with the length and organisation of paragraphs. Text A illustrates the way in which paragraphs in Italian academic prose can be much longer than in English. Many readers might feel that an English paragraph of this length is actually unacceptable. In part this may be because most English paragraphs have what are sometimes called *topic sentences*, which are said to govern the development of paragraphs, whether they come in opening or closing position. Work on English academic writing points out how the function of such sentences in deductive paragraphs (i.e. paragraphs presenting a deductive pattern of argumentation) is to help the reader develop assumptions and expectations about the information that will follow; in inductive paragraphs, instead, various strategies are used to build up these expectations so that the final utterance confirms and unites them (Arnaudet/Barrett 1984: 2-14; Giltrow 2002: 77-81; Roe/den Ouden 2003: 190-191). Text B is an example of an English paragraph with deductive development, in which the substitution and repetition of noun phrases help to take the argument forward. This type of structuring would seem to be less apparent in Italian paragraphs, where even when a topic sentence is present, it may not serve to establish a developmental path for the paragraph as a whole (in the literature on contrastive rhetoric, a more open pattern of this type has sometimes been termed ‘digression’ and identified with certain rhetorical

3 The analysis of texts in two languages necessarily raises the question of *equivalence*, since contrastive statements will be made. This issue was addressed by selecting academic journals which – on the authority of a professor of history – address comparable specialist audiences (see also the discussion in Chapter Four with regard to this point). Cf. also Van Bonn/Swales (2007).

traditions, among which Italian (Clyne 1994: 161; Čmejrková/Daneš 1997)).

Turning now to sentence length and construction, Texts C and D have been chosen to exemplify three common features of Italian academic prose. The first of these is the greater effort required of readers to attach subject function to noun phrases in Italian texts: in Text C it takes some work to re-attach the subject “La disposizione” [The disposition] to the verb “ha” [established] in the co-ordinated clause. The second feature, also illustrated by Text C, is the use of “e” [and] to link clauses, where an English writer would probably have divided the utterance into two separate sentences or used a connective to signal the nature of the relation between the two clauses. Text D shows a third typical feature, the frequent post-modification of subjects, which adds to the quantity of actual information a reader must deal with. The English example (Text E) contains a similarly long sentence. Here, however, the use of the parenthetical “for example” shows the reader how to interpret the sentence, and the punctuation breaks it down into clearly defined units, placing fewer processing demands on the reader. This seems to me to typify how longer pieces of argumentation are structured in English academic prose, with the reader constrained into processing along a certain path.

The third stylistic difference identified by the interviewees is the organisation of information within the sentence. Text F shows how writers of Italian give their readers information about the subject in pre-topic position by modifying the non-finite structure. This may well demand greater processing effort on the part of the reader, particularly since the referring expression often makes use of extra-textual information to set up this link (Evangelisti 1987). The text is also a good example of how the use of subordination increases the complexity of Italian sentence structure. The English example (Text G) does not exploit finite and non-finite clauses to carry modifying structures. In English, information about the subject tends to be foregrounded and then developed if need be through additional sentences (Text H illustrates such a concatenate pattern across a stretch of discourse). This tendency may go a long way towards explaining the perceived *linearity* of English discourse (cf. Evangelisti 1987).

The fourth and fifth differences between Italian and English academic prose highlighted by my interviewees – greater lexical formality and a more extensive use of nominalisation – are closely connected. Italian argumentative writing often makes use of words and phrases coming from Classical Latin, Ancient Greek and old Italian that are not used in everyday spoken language (De Mauro 1970; Brownlees/Denton 1987). A high occurrence of nominalisation in Italian prose also contributes to creating a more sustained tone; Text I provides a good example of both tendencies. Although both lexical formality and nominalisation are also seen as typical of English academic discourse (Freeborn 1996), the vocabulary that English writers use does seem to be more accessible, reflecting language in spoken use in society, and writers tend to root their information in the reality of agents and their actions, as exemplified in Text J.

Assuming that tendencies of this type do exist (and the literature on contrastive rhetoric certainly does support the view that textual practices vary across time and space), the questions to be answered are, first, how are such differences to be analysed from a pragmatic point of view, and, second, what effects, if any, do they have on the interpretation of the texts or discourses in which they occur? It is these two questions that this work sets out to answer.

Although some contrastive work on the grammatical systems of the two languages has been done (Agard/Di Pietro 1965; Porcelli/Maggioni/Tornaghi 2002), relatively few stylistic comparisons of English and Italian texts have been made. However, some work by Evangelisti (1987, 1992, 1994, 1996) shows us that investigations of this kind can be illuminating. She illustrates how information about topic entities is typically handled differently in English and Italian. In a detailed examination of two obituaries (one in each language), she shows how information about the deceased man (the same in both obituaries) is typically placed in different positions in the sentence, and how ongoing references to the dead man in the texts are handled differently. In the English obituary published in the *Guardian*, initial mention of the man is made through a noun phrase – *Mr Charles*

Douglas Home – which occupies topic position.⁴ Subsequent reference is made through pronouns, giving rise to two effects. The first of these is that the initial topic entity remains firmly implanted in the reader’s mind (cf. also Chafe 1979; 1987; 1996); the second is that new information is typically placed after the noun phrase, giving rise to a greater sense of what she (and others working in the field of contrastive rhetoric, cf. Clyne 1994; Čmejrková 1996; Duszak 1997) calls *linearity*, as mentioned above. The reference string set up over the discourse goes as follows: *Mr Charles Douglas Home – He – He – After five years covering defence for the Times HE – A year later HE*, and so on (Evangelisti 1987: 28). In the Italian obituary, published in *La Repubblica*, new information is placed more frequently in pre-topic position, and new noun phrases carrying additional information are used to refer to and maintain the topic entity across the text. In this case the reference string goes as follows: *Charles Douglas Home – Paralizzato da oltre un anno il quarantottenne direttore del quotidiano [Paralyzed for more than a year the forty-eight-year-old editor of the newspaper] – La sua vedova, Gessica Gwynne [his widow, Gessica Gwynne] – Charles Douglas Home – egli [he] – L’aristocratico nipote di Lord Home [Lord Home’s aristocratic grandson/nephew]*, etc. In this way, information about the deceased is typically treated as ‘presupposed’ rather than ‘asserted’ even though it may be new to the hearer. Apart from being interesting in its own right, work of this kind goes some way towards substantiating my sample group’s views about the differences between the two writing styles in the areas listed above.

The features illustrated above provide textual support for my interviewees’ view that readers of Italian texts have to work harder to

4 Evangelisti’s analysis draws on the distinction often made between *topic* and *comment*, where “The topic of a sentence is the person or thing about which something is said, whereas the further statement made about this person/thing is the comment. [...] The topic often coincides with the subject of a sentence (e.g. *A man* / is coming to the door), but it need not (e.g. there’s *the man* / who gave you a lift), and even when it is a subject, it need not come first in a sentence (e.g. John Smith *my name* is)” (Crystal 1980: 358).

achieve understanding than readers of English texts.⁵ If we take this observation as the starting point, then all the comments made by my interviewees can be placed within a broader perspective, one in which text structuring is seen as intimately rooted in conditions of production and comprehension. This need for contextualisation has been underlined by scholars working in a number of disciplines, including applied linguistics, genre studies, language teaching, contrastive rhetoric, stylistics, and so on, all of which have some contribution to make to the work done here. Certainly a key reference in a historical perspective is Kaplan's somewhat controversial work comparing the rhetorical conventions of English academic writing with those of other languages. In reference to subordination, for example, he notes how in Arabic "paragraph development is based on a complex series of parallel construction" whereas in English "maturity of style is often gauged by degree of subordination rather than by co-ordination" (1966: 7-8); writing in some Asian traditions is instead characterized by indirection, in which topics are developed "in terms of what they are not, rather than in terms of what they are", a mode of presentation that to a reader used to the patterns of English academic prose might appear unfocused. Recent work in the area of contrastive rhetoric (cf. Conner 2004; Fakhri 2004; Yajun/Chenggang 2006) testifies to a renewed interest in the kinds of effects that can be achieved by using textual resources in culturally recognisable ways.

5 Other textual features support this observation. When comparing parallel texts published in English and Italian modern history journals (Owtram 1999; 2000), I found that cohesion is also handled differently in the two languages: there are, in fact, substantial differences in the way in which ideas and concepts are introduced and subsequently referred to as the text progresses through the grammatical device of substitution, co-referential reformulation, repetition, and use of connectives. In the English texts, writers seemed to feel the need to guide their readers to a high extent. They did so by using a large number of connectives, substitute forms, reformulations, and repetition. In the Italian texts, by contrast, writers did not seem to guide their readers so much: fewer connectives were used, there was less substitution and little evidence of reformulation, and repetition was used in rather different ways. These results suggest that there are tangible differences in the structuring of textual cohesion of the two languages, which also affect the amount of work that readers must do in order to retrieve the writer's intended meaning.

The work presented in the coming chapters aims to add to this discussion by examining how a relevance theory approach can contribute to an understanding of cultural differences in academic writing through focusing on how assumptions and intentions come into play as communicators (writers and readers) create and understand texts. To do this, I will present a close reading and interpretation of two research article introductions – one in English, the other in Italian, this time from the field of political science. The analysis will focus on the five perceived differences between English and Italian academic prose presented above.

In Chapter Two the study is contextualised by motivating a pragmatic approach to academic discourse in the light of work in related fields (genre analysis, academic discourse, stylistics, etc.). Chapter Three looks at what some recent style manuals for English and Italian writers have to say about these five topics. Chapter Four examines to what extent four widely used theoretical models can provide insights into the way in which writers and readers express and understand textual meaning in two research article introductions, again with reference to the five aspects identified by my interviewees. Chapter Five provides an overview of the aims and methods of relevance theory, while Chapter Six shows how such a cognitive-pragmatic framework can be applied to academic discourse through a close analysis of the same two research article introductions.

A final note about the structure of the book. It is, of course, divided into separate chapters, as described above. However, several *leitmotifs* will also become perceptible in the course of the reading. This is either because they are topics central to any approach to text (here, I am thinking in particular of the notions of coherence and context), or because they have become a recurrent focus in my own work as it has developed (here, I am thinking of the notions of models and conventions). Any work dealing with discourse will necessarily be complex; there is an even greater risk of this in a contrastive study. My aim is to place what I believe to be some of the most interesting questions under a spotlight by examining how relevance theory can contribute to current discussions about academic writing by providing a ‘thick’ description (Bhatia 2002: 21-22) of academic discourse practices in two cultural settings.

2. Setting the Frame: Conceptualisations of Academic Writing

2.1. Introduction

To say that English and Italian texts are different is to state the obvious. As we have seen in the Introduction, informants familiar with both writing cultures can identify a range of formal features which can be readily observed to vary in academic texts.¹

In recent years, these differences have attracted the attention of scholars with socio-linguistic interests. The basic assumption behind this work is that cultural groups not only establish conventions of social behaviour, but that these conventions are internalised and followed in the production and reception of messages (Lavinio 1992; Ventola 1992; Čmejrková 1996). Evangelisti (1992: 13), for example, affirms that “the organisation of elements in sentences and discourse, for example, that of word order, not only corresponds to particular syntactic orderings of the language, [...] but is also culturally determined by communicative conventions following the modalities of thought and behaviour typical of a linguistic and social group”.² But is the notion of cultural norms and conventions a sufficiently strong explanatory framework to account for stylistic differences between English and Italian academic texts? In this and the following chapters

1 On the ability of speakers/writers to reflect on their own linguistic practices, see the burgeoning literature on folk linguistics, e.g. Preston (2005), Paveau (2007).

2 [[...] i fenomeni di organizzazione degli elementi nella frase e nel discorso, di cui la variazione dell'ordine delle parole è un esempio, non rispondano soltanto a particolarità sintattiche di una lingua, [...] ma siano anche culturalmente determinati sulla base delle convenzioni comunicative che seguono le modalità di pensiero e comportamenti tipici della cultura di un gruppo linguistico e sociale]

I will argue that although cultural factors have a role to play, it is more illuminating to approach style as an intrinsic part of strategic language use by assuming a relevance theory perspective.

Before taking up this issue in detail, some basic groundwork must be laid. In this chapter, after a brief outline of the historical background against which the current debate should be viewed, we will first examine – in terms that are as theory-neutral as possible – how discourse analysis and pragmatics can be fruitfully linked. We will then look at how scholars have described written discourse (including the links between writers, texts and readers), examining in turn some of the main contributions made by genre theory, studies of academic writing – including the notions of academic discourse and discourse communities – and contrastive rhetoric (which attempts to tackle some of the differences between writing in different cultures). Finally, we will shift perspective in order to explore how the notions of style and stylistics can contribute to the topics under discussion in this study.

2.2. Historical Background to the Current Debate

That discourse can be described is one of the premises of this study. However, for at least two reasons, it has not always been possible to take this for granted. First, for many years the value of the description of discourse, as opposed to that of isolated sentences, was open to debate,³ and, second, the question of how discourse can or should be described has been subject to much theoretical discussion. Given the gradual paradigm shift towards the analysis of discourse, the first issue can be bypassed in this context, while a few words about the second may be in order here.

3 Cf. Reiser (1978) for a historical introduction to the issues and development of text linguistics. See also, for one of the first collections of papers to treat these features, Conte (1977).

In the short history of discourse analysis, the use of the terms *text* and *discourse* has tended to imply assumptions on the part of the writer about the nature of language and language research. The result has been the elaboration of two main paradigms – *formalist* and *functionalist* – each of which has taken different theoretical issues as its focus, leading to the use of different approaches and tools of analysis (Schiffrin 1994: 20-23).

For the formalists, language is viewed as a grammatical system forming a code, and it is the analysis of this system *per se* that forms the backbone of the approach. On this approach, the uses to which speakers and hearers put language are seen as less important than the study of the system as such. As a result, there is little discussion in this paradigm of the effect of external factors on language, and research is what might be called ‘introverted’, focusing on the way that different units function in relation to each other in text. The main objective is thus to account for relations in the text as it stands (Blakemore 2002: 153).

Functionalist approaches take a wider view of communication in general, and discourse is described explicitly as “language in use” (Brown/Yule 1983: 1); moreover, the internal organisation of language in discourse is viewed as radically affected by the kinds of external functions for which it is used. This anchoring of language in the real world has a number of implications for the sort of research that is carried out: the social functions of language are seen as affecting stylistic choices, relations between language structure and language use are explored, and concepts taken for granted without discussion in formalist approaches (speech acts, discourse communities, speakers and hearers, etc.) are subjected to critical analysis.

In recent years, formalist and functionalist approaches have fruitfully cross-seminated, giving rise to two related concepts, both of which are useful critical instruments for the study of writing. These are the notions of *product* and *process*, where the term *text* tends to be associated with the former and *discourse* with the latter.⁴ Product-

4 Cf. Virtanen’s (1990) interesting discussion on the way that the terms ‘text’ and ‘discourse’ are used in reference to a product versus process approach. In this work I shall use the terms ‘text’ and ‘discourse’ interchangeably.

based approaches to text are the natural descendants of the sentence grammar approaches that predominated in the fifties and sixties. Here, the focus of inquiry is the nature of relations between various elements of the sentence. The fact that there are writers and readers is acknowledged, but the main interest is in the words and structures used to construct meaning in the text itself, rather than on the constraints at work in its production and reception. This perspective is typical of work in text linguistics (De Beaugrande/Dressler 1981; Halliday/Hasan 1976), which has developed its own specific concerns (for example, coherence and cohesion, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four).

What is generally omitted in product-based approaches is an account of the role played by context or by constraints on the participants in the communicative process. These, instead, are fundamental in functionalist/process-based approaches. The limitations of the formalist approach were first described extensively by Brown and Yule (1983), who cite several philosophers and linguists in support of their view that work on both sentences and texts is empirically inadequate if attention is not paid to the situation in which they are produced (1983: 24). Their work exemplifies the shift from *text-as-product* to *discourse-as-process*. This latter approach focuses on how recipients “come to comprehend the producer’s intended message on a particular occasion” and how the constraints of a particular context “influence the organisation of the producer’s discourse” (Brown/Yule 1983: 24). It also highlights more specific problems in language description, particularly textual description. For example, Brown and Yule mention the work by Morgan (1979), who first argued that it is the reader’s assumptions about a writer’s intention to produce a coherent text that triggers the search for meaning (Brown/Yule 1983: 25).

The broadened scope offered by process-based approaches opened the field of discourse analysis up to other important areas of investigation, among which how to embrace insights arising from the field of pragmatics.

2.3. Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics

Both product- and process-based approaches claim to be pragmatic. However, as we have seen, they differ in the questions that they see as central: the main issue for formalists is *whether* a text functions,⁵ while process approaches take as their fundamental questions *why* and *how* a text takes on meaning for the reader.⁶ In establishing these last two issues as a natural area of inquiry, process-based approaches set up an explicit link between the analysis of discourse and some central issues in pragmatics.⁷

Pragmatics is concerned with the interrelationships between meaning, context and communication. A central feature is the assumption that, in order to describe the choice of sentence structures and lexical items in discourse, the understanding that speakers and hearers have of each other in specific contexts must be taken into account (Hatim/Mason 1990: 4). This is important for it means that pragmatic frameworks of description can be used to shed light on the issue at the heart of this work – whether it is possible to describe stylistic differences in terms of the intentions of a communicator working within the constraints and conventions of a particular language and discourse community.

Another advantage of pragmatic frameworks is that – given their concern with context – they provide us with a means for taking cultural variations in discourse into account. Thus, if we believe that speakers “interpret social context and [...] access to interpretation of

5 De Beaugrande and Dressler, for example, talk about ‘standards of textuality’ (1981: 19).

6 For syntheses of the way in which different process approaches have developed along the expressive, cognitive and social constructivist lines, see J.E. Martin 1992: 26-28 and Connor 1996: 71-79 in their discussions of contrastive rhetoric.

7 Definitions of pragmatics vary considerably (cf. Levinson 1983: 1-35; Mey 2001: 3-5). The following definition will be adopted here: “Pragmatics will take as its domain speakers’ communicative intentions, the uses of language that require such intentions and the strategies that hearers employ to determine what these intentions and acts are, so they can understand what the speaker intends to communicate.” (Davis 1991: 11)

utterance through their knowledge of discourse patterns and the world” (George 1984: 14), then different discourse sequences “may [...] conceal different attitudes to language use in general” (1984: 15). Pragmatic models may thus also have something to say about the contrastive stylistic questions in this study.

While it is clear that process-based discourse analysis and pragmatics have much in common, they differ in their methodologies and use of data. Pragmatists (at least in the Gricean tradition) take the development of a theory of communication as their central concern, and its application to particular acts of communication as secondary. They have traditionally focused on isolated utterances, contextualising these in invented scenarios. Discourse analysts, by contrast, treat certain types of communicative act (discourse) as central and the aim of constructing a theory of inferential communication as peripheral, using stretches of natural language as their empirical data and taking a more inductive approach in order to construct generalisations based on the data.

The challenge arising from the encounter between these two research traditions is – as I view it – to combine the concerns and methods of inferential pragmatics with some of the methodological practices of discourse analysis. In this study I will take a broadly pragmatic approach to data that would normally be seen as falling into the domain of discourse analysis. In the first place, I will analyse stretches of discourse, rather than isolated utterances. Secondly, I will be applying pragmatic frameworks to published texts rather than constructed data. Although this methodological shift could be taken as an implicit criticism of an approach that tends to “abstract away from some aspects of reality” (Sperber/Wilson 1997: 148), this is not my intention. Rather, it is a natural consequence of the very practical concern with how to explain some of the differences between discourses produced in similar settings in two different cultures. The third shift (discussed in greater detail below) is that I shall be examining written, rather than spoken, material.

As well as reflecting a general trend in the development of pragmatics, which (at least in some hands) has tended to move away from a basically socio-linguistic mode of inquiry to a more cognitive-

philosophical approach,⁸ I hope that these shifts in working methods will show how the objectives of discourse analysis can be usefully approached using theoretical pragmatic models.

2.4. Written Discourse: Reciprocity and its Effects

Historically, one of the most common ways of describing written discourse has been to compare it with spoken discourse. Initially there was a tendency to treat writing as simply a replication of speaking (cf. discussion in Grabe/Kaplan 1996: 15-18). More recent work has abandoned this unidirectional approach in favour of a broader investigation which focuses not only on similarities but also on differences between writing and speaking. In an early review of the literature, Anderson (1990: 37) proposed two main parameters of comparison by which to systematise these areas: (a) *conditions of language use* – including (i) the presence or absence of shared context (physical and social), and (ii) the presence or absence of interactivity; and (b) *constraints on production and reception* – including (iii) channel constraints (on written language), and (iv) processing constraints (on spoken language) (1990: 37).⁹ This typology remains useful for expositional purposes, as trends in more recent research can also be usefully discussed along these lines. The aim of the next section is to present some of the seminal discussions that have laid much of the ground for current work on writing.

8 Although see Carston/Powell (2005) for an account of recent work in relevance theory using experimental techniques and contributing to the emerging field of *psychopragmatics*.

9 *Conditions* describe the factors affecting language use, i.e. the situational context (either physical or social), in which the communication takes place; *constraints* instead describe the kinds of limits to which oral and written language are subject (Anderson 1990: 37). Perhaps this can be reformulated by saying that *conditions* are constitutive of the communication whereas *constraints*, as a descriptive term, seem to be restrictive features.

2.4.1. Shared Context

Historically speaking, the idea that writing involves some notion of a shared context is relatively recent. Earlier approaches saw written discourse (unlike spoken discourse) as divorced from any physical setting, and therefore as an autonomous, decontextualised product, able to stand on its own. The effect was to shift “the locus of meaning from the context surrounding the words to the words themselves” (Hill/Parry 1988: 5).¹⁰ It therefore comes as no surprise to find that the two main research topics that emerged in this tradition were those of *implicitness versus explicitness* – the amount and type of information that writers feel obliged to encode or express explicitly in their texts – and *reference* – the different linguistic resources available to speakers and writers for establishing reference, and thus achieving coherence.¹¹

The absence of a shared physical context in writing and reading is seen as affecting reference and coherence in the following way. While coherence in speaking is mainly grounded in exophoric (context-based) referring expressions, coherence in writing must derive from cohesive devices located within the text itself (endophoric reference) (Anderson 1990: 38). For example, in the first, exophoric, type of reference a mother might say to her child, “Tazio, don’t forget to put away those toys you’ve left over there”, where the deictic referents of ‘those toys’ and ‘there’ can only be satisfactorily interpreted if it is possible for both participants to see some pile of toys left within their field of vision; interpretation is in this case guided by an extra-textual and thus (physical) contextual process of reference.

In endophoric, text-based reference, relations can be either anaphoric (backward-looking) or cataphoric (forward-looking) and they are seen as creating cohesive relations in text. Brown and Yule give us an example of each type:

10 This view also predominated in the field of applied linguistics, where writing was treated as the ‘back-up’ skill for grammatical competence (Richards/Rodgers 1986; Owtram 1994).

11 There are numerous definitions of coherence, all of which tend to reflect specific theoretical positions (cf. Hobbs 1978; De Beaugrande 1980; Charolles 1983; Brown/Yule 1983; Blass 1990).

- (i) anaphoric – Look at the sun. It’s going down quickly.
(*It* refers back to *the sun*.)
- (ii) cataphoric – It’s going down quickly, the sun.
(*It* refers forwards to *the sun*.) (1983: 193)

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), these relations look either forward or backward in the text for interpretation. The problems to which this kind of description gives rise have been amply discussed in the literature (Brown/Yule 1983; Fox 1987; Blass 1990, 1993; Unger 1996; Bex 1996). Perhaps my own greatest difficulty with Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) approach (and other approaches focusing on text) lies in the basic question they ask: whether a text can be regarded as well-formed, acceptable or comprehensible at all if these relations do not hold. Does it matter what formal properties a text exhibits if in the minds of the interlocutors it is fully acceptable and comprehensible? Perhaps we should be tackling the notions of acceptability and comprehensibility directly, rather than isolating formal features that may be neither necessary nor sufficient for either.

Closely connected to the question of reference are the notions of implicitness and explicitness. Here is what Hill and Parry say about explicitness:

[...] while text is produced in a specific place and at a specific time, it may – and probably will – be read in a different place and at a later point in time. This fact makes any deictic reference to space or time useless, unless some anchor, such as an address or a date, is included within the text itself. Similarly, no meaningful reference can be made to entities outside the text unless they are in some way identified. Thus explicitness becomes, according to this model, a peculiar characteristic of written language, for a text must state within itself what its orientations and purposes are and to whom and what it refers. (1988: 5)

Questions about implicitness and explicitness are thus linked to questions about the *amount* of information that needs to be explicitly expressed by writers in order to be understood. Olson also underlines the fact that writers (unlike speakers, who can exploit a series of prosodic and paralinguistic devices to guide the hearer) “must guard against ambiguity” (Olson 1977: 272); in order to achieve this, writers must make recourse to endophoric textual devices of the kind described above.

Moreover, since the need for increased explicitness in writing is seen as triggered by the lack of a shared physical context (or the possibility of using paralinguistic features), a further point is made by these theorists in giving guidelines for clear writing. This point is linked to Grice's distinction between meaning (interpreted as *speaker-writer intention*) and saying (interpreted as *speaker-writer expression*). In this tradition, clarity in writing is best achieved by encoding the writers' intentions as fully as possible or expressing them explicitly in the texts themselves: hence, "fullness of meaning is explicitness of text" (Nystrand 1986: 84). More specifically, this approach implies that the clearest text is one in which a reader is obliged to use fewer inferential processes because the words and ideas are explicitly expressed on the page in front of him (Anderson 1990: 39).

In brief, work on written texts in the so-called autonomous tradition treats them as context-independent and self-referential, with a dense network of endophoric references. Clearly, this approach raises many questions, not least to do with the fact that the views of spoken and written discourse on which they are based are considerably oversimplified. As Nystrand points out, surely we should see this work as contributing to the identification of "*differences in selected uses of speaking and written language*" (Nystrand 1986: 86, italics in original), rather than as differences between the two *tout court*. Indeed, he went on to question the validity of this kind of distinction at all. In an experiment on four different discourse types which were analysed for degree of explicitness (defined as involving more endophoric and less exophoric discourse), he showed that the endophoric mode is used more frequently in discussing abstract issues, whether in written or spoken discourse (1986: 86-92). More important, however, was Nystrand's criticism of the claim that written texts are uncontextualised, and his proposal that written texts should be seen as having contexts "of eventual or potential use" (1986: 95). This in turn led him to reject earlier views of explicitness: "An explicit text is not a text whose meaning is completely embodied in the text but rather a text about which relevant contextual evidence is not in dispute" (1986: 96). Underlying this new view is the belief that readers construe meaning in a "dynamic process of text interpretation and contextualisation" (Anderson 1990: 41), and this brings us back to a view of written text, like spoken text, as requiring a context of some sort.

Nystrand's work in this area has been very influential in developing an understanding of writing processes, particularly as regards the distinction between two types of context, *context of production* and *context of use* (1986: 45). He believes that it is important to tackle the issue of delayed processing; to do so he introduces the notion of *context of eventual use*. A writer is seen as making hypotheses about her readers and their assumptions, and formulating her text accordingly. For this reason, the eventual context of use "impinges as much upon the writer as the reader" (1986: 46) with writers rereading, revising, adding, cutting, expanding and so forth on a constant basis, as they project contexts of production into contexts of eventual use to test the intended effectiveness of their discourse. Nystrand's point is that it is the imagined context of eventual use that is most important in regulating the final form of the discourse, in that it functions as the arbitrator between "the expressive needs of the writer and the comprehension needs of the reader" (1986: 47). The crucial difference between speech and writing, in his view, is that, in writing, the context will be activated at a point which is further off in time than in speaking, where contexts of production and use are virtually simultaneous (1986: 46). These insights have paved the way for subsequent work, leading to a thicker and more strongly developed understanding of context in relation to writing.¹² And a rich view of context is crucial to the relevance-based cognitive framework that I will be using in my analyses.

2.4.2. Interactivity

This brings me to the second feature in Anderson's scheme: that of *interactivity*, or the negotiation that occurs between people when they communicate. In the absence of a specific, well-identified receiver for written discourse, for many years researchers working within a quantitative paradigm preferred to use the narrower notion of *informativity*

12 For a reflection on the links between context and written genres, see Paltridge (1997); Hyland (2004). For an overview of theoretical concerns on context in a wider perspective, see also Goodwin/Duranti (1992); Malmkjaer/Williams (1998).

to describe many of the features of writing which seem to take the reader into account. The notion of informativity was a natural corollary to a key idea in the autonomous approach to text, i.e. that written discourse should be more fully packed with information precisely in order to convey the writer's full meaning. Biber's early studies on differences between spoken and written discourse (e.g. Biber 1988) carried out a factor analysis on a wide number of texts to check for co-occurrence patterns among the linguistic features of the corpus. He found six co-occurrence patterns that were seen as reflecting six communicative/functional dimensions of variation in texts. Among the *involved* versus *informational production* dimension, spoken texts (e.g. public speeches, public interviews, and broadcasts) showed a higher degree of interactive language ('I', 'you', hedges, final prepositions and so on), while the written sample (e.g. academic prose, professional letters and the press) showed a higher degree of informational focus (measured by greater word length and lexical variety).

Recent research has re-examined this view, and the notions of interactivity and informativity have been redefined. As the distinction between spoken and written discourse has been shown to be less categorical than previously thought, views on interactivity in relation to writing have evolved, particularly in relation to academic writing. In particular, more emphasis has been placed on the roles played by the writer and presumed reader in creating text, and on the linguistic and rhetorical strategies that can be used to do this (Bondi 1999; Thompson 2001). Much of this reconceptualisation is due to the impact on writing research of the work of Bakhtin (1981), which views all acts of communication, including writing, as 'dialogic' and hence presupposing an addressee (Prior 1998: 20-21). In Bakhtin's work, texts are also seen as involving a multiplicity of voices, in the sense that they draw, both consciously and unconsciously, on the thoughts and opinions of other people (cf. discussion in Goodwin/Duranti 1992). This perspective undermines the assumption, implicit in previous research on writing, that texts are the expression of a single speaker whose identity stays stable across time (Paltridge 1997: 12). It has also given rise to interesting work on *averral*, *attribution* and *citation* in academic writing as tangible realisations of these

different voices in text (Sinclair 1987; Hyland 1999a; Hunston 2000; Bondi/Silver 2004; Silver/Bondi 2004; Masi 2007).¹³

The notion of interactivity has also become more central to research on reading. Earlier approaches to the reading process saw the text as a kind of container from which information could be extracted (rather like a cup being emptied). The efficiency of a reader was thus measured in quantitative terms – the amount of information that he managed to get out of it. On this view, it was clearly the text itself (and the relations within it) that constituted the focus of attention (again reflecting the autonomous approach to text).

More modern research has radically recast this issue, moving from the idea of *reaction* to text to that of *interaction* with it (Widdowson 1979; Goodman 1988; Grabe 1988, 2001; Hirvela 2004). As a result, the reader is now seen as contributing in his own right to the interpretation process. As he reads, the reader gains indications from the text about how he should draw on his own experience and knowledge to understand what the writer is trying to say. In other words, the real activity is seen as taking place in the reader's head rather than in the text; thus the discourse should be conceptualised more as a mediator between the two worlds of the writer and the reader than as the sole bearer of meaning. This view of reading implies an orientation towards text that is both cognitive and pragmatic: the text is informative for the reader to the extent that it supports, refines or extends his conceptual world view. Indeed, it can be said that the true sign of successful reading activity lies in the altering of states of knowledge in the mind of the reader in the way that the writer intended (Widdowson 1984: 94).

In his classic and still illuminating discussion of the reading process, Widdowson (1979) distinguishes between what he terms *heuristic* and *epistemological* functions (1979: 179-180): the reader stacks the newly-processed information into two distinct layers according to the way in which it achieves relevance. The first stage – that of the heuristic function, which Widdowson also calls the *facilitating procedure* – is when the reader interacts with the text and gains an immediate understanding of it. Only then does he begin to discrimi-

13 For Bakhtin's contribution to genre studies, see below in Section 2.5.