

Semantics and Social Values

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Text semantics and discourse formations

One of the most basic principles of functional linguistics is that the resources of language have evolved in relation to their social uses in human communities. In Systemic-Functional linguistics this means that the semantic and lexicogrammatical choices a language makes available to us correspond to the kinds of meaning-making that occur in a society (cf. Halliday 1978). Linguistic analysis can begin from the question, What is it possible to mean? in a language, and proceed to specify how each possible variation in meaning can be realized with the linguistic resources of that language. The resources themselves can then be organized and classified for purposes of description in terms of what kinds of differences in meaning they enable us to make.

If we require that they be general enough that every meaningful linguistic unit be analyzable as functioning in all the fundamental functional modes simultaneously, we can identify three or four 'most fundamental' functions in language. If we take, for example, the clause as our unit of interest, then every clause can be analyzed for how it produces representational meaning, interactional meaning, and textual meaning (cf. Halliday 1985 on the Ideational, Interpersonal, and Textual metafunctions; Lemke, in press-d: Chap. 8 on the primary Representational, Orientational, and Organizational semiotic functions.)

Every clause constructs some representation of the material and social world; it has some ideational, experiential, propositional, thematic meaning 'about' the world. The transitivity resources of a language enable us to place Agents and Patients in relations of action and process to one another; the resources of tense and aspect let us locate and further specify those processes and define events.

Every clause also defines a putative interaction in a speech situation, a contribution to a dialogue or exchange, a specification of the stance of speakers and addressees toward one another and the thematic content of the clause. The resources of mood and modality, status forms, honorifics, and pejoratives contribute to meaning of this second sort. And finally, every clause makes a contribution to the 'textness' of language in use, to its coherence and cohesion, to the larger units of meaning and structures of organization of information that enable us to distinguish a text from a set of unconnected clauses or sentences (Halliday & Hasan 1976). The resources of conjunction, reference, dependency, taxis, and lexical cohesion contribute to this third sort of meaning.

As with clauses, so with other units: nominal and verbal groups 'below' the clause (Halliday 1985:Chap.6), clause-complexes 'above' it (Chap.7), and larger discourse units of various sorts (Lemke, in press-a, in press-b). These primary linguistic functions are so general because they are in fact the fundamental semiotic functions, applying to all semiotic systems (visual display, music, architecture, gesture, etc.) and not just to language (Lemke, in press-d:Chap.8). The study of grammar has led the way in identifying these functions and the resources that enable them. Having once identified the functions and observed their generality, it becomes the task of language study to consider what linguistic resources other than grammar also contribute to our ability to make meanings of these kinds with language. Recently, advances in discourse analysis have made it possible to consider how the intertextual, rhetorical, and generic (in the sense of genre) resources of language use in a community help us make texts that mean representationally, interactionally, and textually (see Hasan 1984a, 1984b; Lemke 1983, 1985, 1988, in press-a, in press-b; Martin 1985, in press; Thibault, in press-a, in press-b).

If the resources of grammar tell us what can be meant in a language, then discourse formations tell us what repeatedly is meant in a community. Discourse formations result from the deployment of linguistic resources in regular, patterned, repeatable and repeated ways. Written and spoken genres, together with the rhetorical formations of a community, define patterns of organization of textual meaning (Bakhtin 1986b, Halliday & Hasan 1985, Hasan 1984b, Lemke in press-a, Martin 1985, Mann & Thompson 1987). They correspond to the fundamental function of language in organizing social life and social action into recognizable activity types (greetings, jokes, lessons, sermons; problem-and-solution, cause-and-consequences, etc.).

The fundamental function of language in aiding the social construction of a meaningful world has resulted in the various thematic formations of our community. These are its repeated ideational semantic patterns, common to large numbers of texts that (re-)present some particular view of the world: the conceptual schemas of a science, the underlying event-sequences of a tale told many ways, etc. (Lemke 1983, 1988, in press-d).

Most recently, discourse analysis has tried to formulate the interactional semantics of text. We do not use language simply to organize action or to describe (or even create) events and their relations. Language is also a resource for the creation and maintenance of social relations and value systems. Every discourse voice, embodied in text, constructs a stance towards itself and other discourse voices. It evaluates, explicitly or implicitly, what it has to say and the relation of what it has to say to what others do say or may say. Its evaluative orientation includes, but is not limited to, certitude or truth value. It can define any value orientation toward what it says and/or toward what others say: appropriateness, usefulness, morality, pleurability; all the forms of 'rightness' and 'goodness'.

Texts construct putative models of their addressees and of the discourse world of competing voices in which they are to be heard. They take some stance toward real and possible interlocutors, and toward what they themselves and these others may say. This fundamentally dialogical view of text was introduced by Bakhtin (1981, 1986a), along with the notion of heteroglossia: that all the diverse social voices (classes, genders, movements, epochs, viewpoints) of a community form an intertextual system within which each is necessarily heard. He pointed out that the relations which texts construct among these voices (including those to the text's own voice) are both ideational (representationally semantic) and axiological, i.e. value-orienting (interactionally semantic).

How do texts embody systems of social values? What are the linguistic resources for constructing a value orientation toward one's own and others' texts? How are these resources deployed against the pervasive intertextual background of the heteroglossia of a community? How can we best characterize the interactional, orientational, axiological discourse formations of a text and, generally, these dimensions of its global patterning?

This paper represents a preliminary exploration of these issues in relation to a few texts. Other new work on these questions can be found in Paul Thibault's development of the notion of the Global Modal Program of a text (Thibault, in press-b), Jim Martin's work on Macroproposals (Martin, in press), and my own work on semantics and ideology (Lemke 1987, 1988, in press-c, in press-d, in press-e).

Value Orientation and Heteroglossia

Text semantics is as much an intertextual as it is an intratextual phenomenon. The ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning made within a text (to use Halliday's terms) depends as much on how that text is read in relation to other texts as on the construction of meaning relations within the text. It is useful to analyze the intertextual semantics of a text in terms of the discourse formations of the community in which that text is read. These abstract the common semantic features of large sets of co-thematic or co-generic texts. While this practice is well established for ideational and textual meaning (see references above), we do not yet have clear formulations for interpersonal meaning.

The discussion of the previous section suggests that we generalize the notion of interpersonal, interactional meaning to include all the sorts of meaning which tend to establish stances or Orientations of a text toward its own and other 'voices'. The notion of voice here provides a starting point for formalizing the discourse formations that participate in a social system of heteroglossia. They are defined not just by their thematic content, but by the system of axiological or value-orienting relations they construct among some set of discourse formations, including their own.

The voice of a text is heard only against the background of the voices of other texts, within some relatively stable social system of heteroglossia. A text voice orchestrates the available social voices of heteroglossia, speaking some in its own name, and putting others in the mouths of those it defines as opponents, allies, or bystanders. It construes, directly or indirectly, value-orienting relations among these voices, evaluating some favorably and others unfavorably, and modifying, reproducing, or presupposing the prevailing relations of the voices in a community.

In these ways the voice of a text extends the notion of the speech role of the speaker of a text, and the system of heteroglossia generalizes from the immediate speech situation to the wider social 'context of culture' (Malinowski 1923). A text may assume a speech role and project roles of addressee and audience, inclusive and exclusive we, etc. A

text voice may speak, explicitly or implicitly, on behalf of a social position or category, a movement, theory, ideology, or viewpoint. It may project other such viewpoints and construe relations among them and with itself.

The notion of value-orienting meaning resources generalizes from such grammatical categories as Modality, which establishes the stance of a clause toward the truth-value, probability, or certitude of its ideational content (could be, may be, must be), to the orientation of a text voice to other value dimensions of its own and other discourses: their 'rightness' in many senses. It is these resources that establish the axiological relations of social voices within the intertextual system of heteroglossia, and which enable every text to position itself (and/or be positioned by readers) within that system. A single text voice may work to reconstitute these relations, but only the emergence of a stable intertextual formation in its community can finally do so. In practice, in complex social communities there will always be multiple viewpoints even on the matter of the relationships among viewpoints.

Text 1 already plunges us into social heteroglossia with its first two lines.

Text 1: From the 'Moral Majority'

1 To suggest
2 that homosexuality is a sickness
3 or that it is a physical condition caused by biological facts
4 rather than an emotional and mental condition
5 is highly blasphemous.

6 The Bible tells us
7 that the cause of homosexuality is sin.
8 A person is not born a homosexual;
9 he becomes one according to his sinful will.
10 A person lets sin and the devil take control of his life.

The word homosexuality in our community names a controversial issue. It also names a field of discourse: all those many texts that may be said to deal with it in one way or another. Those texts, in terms of what they say on the subject, i.e. their ideational-thematic formations, express or combine a limited number of ways of speaking about the topic (Lemke 1988). In addition, they take (or are construed by readers as taking) some position on the subject, and as constructing a value-orientation toward what they say and what others say. The voices of these texts are heard against the background of a definable set of heteroglot social voices, each speaking an alternative discourse on homosexuality. Text 1 constructs, in the clause homosexuality is a sickness, a thematic proposition common to many social voices in this field. Within those discourses, this identification uses the very widespread negative value-orientation to sickness to negatively evaluate homosexuality. In some voices, this identification may carry over a note of sympathy linked to sickness, though we know that in many others, an expression like "That's sick!" is a pure pejorative. Value-orientations are complex in that many values may be at stake: truth-value, moral value, instrumental value, etc. Ordinary illness has a negative instrumental value, but may be morally neutral. On the other hand, "Alcoholism is a sickness" will be heard against the background of competing social voices which proclaim that "Drunkenness is a moral weakness".

Truth-value is at stake in Text 1 as well. The opening to suggest is a lexical modal, agnate with such alternative as to assert, to suspect, to deny. It raises the issue of the degree of certainty, the truth-value of the identification. Moral valuation and truth valuation become intertwined as this text develops.

Line 3 offers an alternative identification, assigning it the same tentative truth value, but its thematic content is characteristic of a more technical discourse voice in this field, a scientific or clinical one. This is a high prestige voice for many readers, though perhaps not for this text voice. In its own terms, the scientific voice can be heard as asserting a strong truth-claim (no qualifying modals), but making no moral claim. There is not even any clear instrumental valuation. A condition is not as clearly inexpedient as a sickness.

With rather than, Line 4 reverses the relative polarity of the text voice and the unnamed voices that suggest these things. It now seems to suggest this identification itself, and surprises us with the semantic contrast it makes: emotional and mental vs. physical and biological. The contrast sets the stage for a truth claim. The text voice will have to favor one or the other of these last two identifications. Line 5 makes an explicit valuation and fixes the absolute polarity: NEGATIVE to the first two identifications, POSITIVE by inference to the third.

The valuation to suggest ... is highly blasphemous is an extreme one. The value-orienting term blasphemous is one that can only be construed as negative (except perhaps by Satanists), but more significantly it defines the discourse of the text voice as Religious. In the system of heteroglossia, an OPPOSITION is now established between the text voice, speaking a Religious discourse about homosexuality, and all discourse voices that affirm, however tentatively, the condemned identifications.

Line 6 is textually in parallel with Line 1. Each projects the lines that follow as if in indirect quotation. The differences are interesting. Line 6 has tells, a more affirmative modality than the tentative suggests. Line 6 also has a finite verb with an explicit subject, the Bible, whereas the nonfinite of Line 1 can leave the blasphemers conveniently unidentified. This contrast, however, furthers the construction of the OPPOSITION between Blasphemers and Bible-believers, or more precisely, between the Religious-Bible discourse and its opposed discourses.

Line 7, repeating cause, contrasts with Line 3, opposing Biblical to scientific discourse. This is elaborated in the remaining lines, where the theme of sinful will is developed.

Returning from heteroglossia to direct value-orientation, we find the pejorative sinful linked three times to homosexuality and homosexual persons. The NEGATIVE valuation is further reinforced by devil, and both forms again identify the text voice's primary discourse as Religious.

As a final note, recall that the identification of Line 4 is presumably endorsed by the text voice, and needs to be reconciled (for most readers) with the thematics of the last four lines. It turns out that in the discourse community of this text voice, Line 4 is to be read as expressing the discourse of a brand of volitional psychology which is taken to be ALLIED with Religious discourse and OPPOSED to the more exculpatory scientific discourse cited in Line 3 (see Lemke 1988).

Needless to say the Religious discourse of this text voice is only one among many Christian discourses on homosexuality, ranging from the extreme negative value-orientation of this Fundamentalist 'Moral Majority' tract, through the subtle moral and theological niceties of orthodox Roman Catholic or mainstream Protestant discourses, to the forthright positive value-orientations of liberal theologians and Gay Christians themselves (including Gay fundamentalists). But all these voices are only a small part of the spectrum of discourses on the subject. Non-religious discourses include those of clinical psychology, social biology, civil libertarianism, naive toleration, naive homophobia, and Gay advocacy.

Text 2 is taken from the largest circulation mainstream publication of the U.S. Gay community, *The Advocate*.

Text 2: From The Advocate

1 In 1984 the only remaining serious objection to homosexuality
2 is religious. Scientific observation and modern statistical
3 surveying show that homosexuality is a normal variation of sexual
4 behavior in human beings. [Scientific observation] has changed
5 the way the modern world views sex. We look scientifically.
6 We no longer look to ancient 'revealed' texts to find facts
7 about the world. We look to the world. With that shift in
8 methodology, old superstitions have been debunked. ...

9 Thanks to [scientific observation] it can be shown that
10 homosexuals are not incarnated demons or witches, not criminals
11 or spies,
12 Today homosexuality is understood to be a psychological condition,
13 a quirk of personality ... a simple personal characteristic.
14 There is no evidence that active homosexuals are mentally
15 disordered or socially dysfunctional. ...

16 Certain religious groups, however, demand, in spite of the
17 evidence, that this particular trait be singled out for special
18 condemnation and blame.

The first sentence of this text announces again the controversial topic. It also sets the stage for an OPPOSITION of discourses by naming Religious discourse as the only remaining objection to homosexuality. We do not yet know, of course, that this text will itself object to the Religious discourse, but contextual evidence certainly suggests it. The second sentence cites Scientific discourse and introduces the first overt value-orientation in the attribute normal. The POSITIVE value-orientation of this lexical choice is primarily intertextual. It is against the background of the common negative valuation that homosexuality is abnormal, that this will be read.

The remaining sentences through Line 8 condemn Religious discourse on homosexuality, and perhaps Religious discourse more widely. They OPPOSE it to Scientific discourse and ALLY the latter to the text voice. This is done in a rather subtle fashion. There is no single clause where the value-orientation is explicitly established; a global discourse strategy is used instead. From Line 1 to Line 8 we can identify a thematic foregrounding of the opposition of MODERNITY and TRADITION. It is realized for instance through: In 1984, remaining, modern, changed, modern world, no longer, ancient, shift, old, debunked. Textually, we find repeated parallelism of structure as the basis for a contrast between OLD RELIGIOUS and MODERN SCIENTIFIC.

The terms with the clearest value-orientation are superstition and debunked. The first is NEGATIVE, and intertextually it is frequently contrasted with science and often associated with religious belief. The text itself does not construct the contrast or make the association, but it clearly relies on both. The contrast that is used is that between MODERN and ANCIENT, with its value polarity favoring the new, and that between SCIENCE and ancient, 'revealed' texts, which clearly favors the former in this discourse voice. The use of 'scare quotes' on 'revealed' prepares us to make the value association to superstition later. We do not get the value-positive term Bible, here, but rather a gloss that casts doubt on the truth-value of its texts and their relevance to the modern world. We cannot read the last sentence without hearing in the background all the discourse voices which proclaim that science has debunked religion as mere superstition, even though the text's use of superstitions is cataphoric to those enumerated in subsequent lines (9-15).

Line 12 is interesting for its near identity to Line 4 of Text 1. Both text voices appear to endorse the same thematics here, but in fact they are still in OPPOSITION to one another because in Text 1 the identification has been opposed to the voice of scientific discourse, while in Text 2 it has been allied with it. The relations of discourse voices, as construed by a particular text, are an essential part of its linguistic resources for establishing value-orientations. Lexis and grammar up to the rank of the clause contribute to larger discourse strategies (thematic, textual, and orientational) through which valuations are made.

Value Orientation and Ideology

Text 3 gives us another opportunity to look at discourse strategies. It is taken from a published research report reanalyzing a large number of statistical studies of variation in students' scores on standardized tests (Graue, Weinstein, & Walberg 1983: 351). Its highly dubious conclusions were subsequently used by both the authors and the federal government to shift responsibility for the problems of disadvantaged students onto the students' own parents (see discussion in Lemke, in press-c).

Text 3: Technocratic Discourse

1. Many large-scale sociological and economic studies
2. show weak and inconsistent associations
3. of educational outcomes with school-resource proxy variables
4. such as expenditures per student and school size,
5. and relatively moderate and consistent amounts of variance
6. associated with student background variables
7. such as socioeconomic status (SES) and family size
8. (McDermott, 1976).

9. Other research suggests
10. that specific and alterable behaviors of parents toward their children
11. such as intellectual stimulation in the home environment
12. are still more strongly predictive of cognitive development
13. than are such proxy variables
14. as family SES and size (Walberg and Marjoribanks, 1976).

To fully understand the value-orienting strategies employed in this text, it needs to be seen in a particular intertextual context. The text voice here speaks mainly the technical discourse of Educational Research, but this text and others like it derive from a research agenda whose viewpoint on social issues follows a politically conservative ideology. Its use in policy debate in education combines that ideology with a newer, technocratic one. The latter essentially seeks to bypass debate on social interests and social values, conservative or otherwise, and impose policy on the grounds that 'the facts' demand it. In this introductory segment of the text a particular discourse strategy is used to override general social values with purely technical ones, laying the basis for the technocratic conclusions.

The thematic semantics of the passage follows a single pattern: CORRELATIONS of higher or lower DEGREE are asserted between a number of FACTORS and students' TEST SCORES. This pattern is a common thematic discourse formation of Educational Research texts. Most of these texts, including this one, can only be fully made sense of by cross-reference to a number of others which share this common pattern of semantic relations. The lexical items correlation and test score do not appear in the passage. They do appear elsewhere in the text, but would be inferred by a reader versed in this discourse formation even if they did not. For our purposes they simply name the semantic elements in the thematic formation of the text.

CORRELATIONS is instanced by the items associations, variance associated and predictive in context. Even though the last item is not a synonym in general lexical semantics, it is a thematic equivalent here (Lemke 1983, in press-c). TEST SCORES is instanced by educational outcomes and cognitive development. The items representing DEGREE and FACTORS should be fairly clear, especially in Lines 1-7. The complete thematic pattern of TEST SCORES--CORRELATE--TO DEGREE--WITH FACTORS applies repeatedly in the passage.

Our particular concern now is with the value-orientations produced by the passage. In Lines 1-2 we get a projection very like The Bible tells us that, in which high POSITIVE value is associated with large-scale sociological and economic studies in the view of this discourse voice. Large-scale studies have high technical value because they are statistically more reliable than small-scale ones, and relatively rarer (hence high value on many as well). Sociological and economic studies are also more prestigious than 'educational' studies per se in this community. Line 9 repeats the projection in a less value-marked form.

The DEGREE items form an important value progression in the text: weak and inconsistent is low to NEGATIVE in the technical value system for correlations. Moderate and consistent is low POSITIVE, and more strongly predictive is high POSITIVE. Even the choice of predictive as the lexicalization of CORRELATION here has higher positive valuation than does association or variance. We need to understand that in the technical value system, i.e. in technical discourse in this field, strong correlations and predictivity are close to the ultimate technical values, the markers of success in research.

This technical value progression has been linked by the text voice (through the repeated thematic formation) to the FACTORS. The effect is to establish a value-orientation toward the FACTORS themselves, to re-rank their valuation according to a scale of technical values. School expenditures, which outside this text would have high POSITIVE value for those interested in education, are devalued here, and socioeconomic status gets ranked in importance well behind alterable behaviors of parents toward their children. By itself, this last FACTOR would normally provoke fairly NEGATIVE value reactions, implying as it does that someone should alter how parents act toward their children, which certainly raises the spectre of a Big Brother policy. It should also be clear that it is only the poor whose behavior needs altering (e.g. the next paragraph has "Although poverty and family size are not easily changed on a mass scale, the behaviors of parents may be favorably altered ...")

Intertextually, however, we know that in technical research discourse, any FACTOR which is alterable is relatively highly valued because it makes possible controlled, experimental research, which is the most highly valued kind from this particular viewpoint. The residual NEGATIVE on the factor is then overcome by glossing it as intellectual stimulation, which is highly POSITIVE. Even the final lexical choice of proxy, while technically fairly neutral, is negative enough (cf. surrogate, ersatz) to further devalue the FACTORS of Lines 7 and 14. We should also note that the lexical choices for TEST SCORES shift from a moderate, educational outcomes, to a highly POSITIVE form, cognitive development, as the text voices re-ranks the FACTORS.

The overall effect, thematically and textually, lexically and via the discourse strategy, is to create a value-orientation toward the FACTORS which is the one favored by this particular text voice. The technical value system alone could

not predict these value rankings. They are the creation of the text voice, making use of intertextual and discourse-level linguistic resources in a complex way.

Neither this text, nor those that use it in policy debate (cited in Lemke, in press-c), deal with the social value issues at stake. In all matters there is a middle- and upper-middle class bias in values; for example, regarding attitudes to family size and what constitutes 'intellectual stimulation'. There is clearly a class interest as well: avoiding additional expense, while at the same time maintaining control of the forms required for academic success. This discourse does not consider whether altering the behavior of poor parents simply means making them conform to middle-class patterns without affording them middle-class lives.

The ideology of a text voice or a discourse formation is determined by asking whether the text promotes value-orientations that favor the interests of one social group at the expense of others, while at the same time disguising these interests. Linguistic analysis can ground the study of ideological meanings made with the resources of language, provided that it extends itself to describing how texts establish value-orientations.

The study of language as a resource for meaning begins with a functional approach to grammar and lexis, but it cannot end there. Language is not simply used to produce word-meaning or clause-meaning, it is used to produce text-meaning, and texts, by co-patterning many word-choices and clause formations, can make meanings that words and clauses cannot. That is why we make texts. Text-meaning realizes social functions (even in texts that may consist of a single word or clause), and among the most important social functions of texts is the maintenance and modification of social value systems.

Socially and functionally text is a mode of action. What we do with texts determines in the long run what resources we demand of language: not just the resources of lexis and grammar, but those of discourse formations and text semantics. The resources for making meaning with language necessarily include the intertextual discourse formations of a community and their heteroglossic relations of opposition, complementarity, or alliance (Lemke 1988, in press-d). The social functions that have shaped these resources include a need to struggle over conflicts of social interests and values. An adequate functional theory of language must explore not just the grammar of interpersonal interaction, speech situation, and clause modality, but its generalization to the text semantics and discourse resources by which texts orient and align their voices in the complex intertextual world of a community's values, interests, and social viewpoints.

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