9 MEANING ATTRIBUTION IN AMBIGUOUS TEXTS IN SOCIOLOGY

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The recognition that academic writing is a social activity—shaped by and in turn reshaping a discourse community—has led to a shift in the focus of study away from the text formats and styles employed in various disciplines to broader interest in the conventions and shared knowledge that bind together acts of reading, writing, and thinking in an interpretive community (Moore and Peterson). As James Porter convincingly argues, the study of academic discourse needs to pay attention not only to texts but to "the social framework regulating textual production," to the shared "assumptions about what objects are appropriate for examination and discussion, what operating functions are performed on those objects, what constitutes 'evidence' and 'validity,' and what formal conventions are followed" (39).

Surprisingly, though the analysis of academic and professional texts has recently shifted in focus "from the formal features of an isolated text toward the whole text as an instance of language functioning in a context of human activity" (Brandt, 93; Miller and Selzer; Swales and Najjar; Peters), and though survey research and case studies have helped identify some general discourse conventions and audience expectations for academic and professional writing (Herrington; Odell and Goswami; Eblen; Myers; Brown and Herndl), little attention has been paid to the interaction of specific readers and texts. The present study, therefore, examines the responses of readers in a particular interpretive community (academic sociology) to one common form of discourse in the field (undergraduate writing) in order to identify the conventions guiding reader response and interpre-

tation of texts. In so doing, the study demonstrates a method of inquiry into text-reader relationships that may be of use in understanding the conventions shaping discourse in other interpretive communities.

Prior studies of academic writing have often focused primarily on texts (Swales and Najjar) and have not taken into account the incompleteness of the evidence provided by the texts. Because they are addressed to specialized readers, even well-formed academic texts (both professional and student) often contain omissions in information, method, or form which are to be supplied through inference by skilled readers belonging to the disciplinary community (Popken). Moreover, because they are sharply focused in topic and method, individual academic texts, no matter how exemplary, make available for examination only a small portion of the discourse conventions of a discipline.

Cognitive psychology and reading theory have demonstrated the likelihood, however, that the social, cultural, and methodological constraints of a discourse community as well as its semantic and formal conventions are represented in detail in the memory of expert readers from the community, where the representations constitute an important part of the prior knowledge necessary to comprehend a text. Such knowledge is manifested in the sets of expectations (schema or frames) employed in comprehension and in the processes of inference and interaction between textual cues and prior knowledge that readers employ in building a mental representation of a text's meaning (van Dijk and Kintsch; Kucer).

Since text and context come together in the act of reading, many of the assumptions and constraints shaping discourse in an academic discipline should be observable in the expectations of expert readers, in the interpretive strategies they employ, and in the way specific elements of texts satisfy or fail to satisfy the readers' expectations. Bazerman's study of the professional reading of physicists makes use of this kind of evidence to show how "structured background knowledge (or schemata)" guides the ways physicists comprehend and evaluate texts and to examine the role of reading in creating the shared understandings that are key elements in the social construction of disciplinary knowledge (20–21). Yet Bazerman does not examine in detail the interaction of textual features and reader expectations, nor does he provide ways of identifying the formal and semantic conventions governing discourse within a disciplinary community.

The study reported in this paper examines reader-text interaction to identify discourse conventions guiding student writing and instructor response in sociology. Admittedly, the conventions regulating different kinds of written discourse in a discipline—including research articles, popular reports, and student papers—can be expected to differ. Yet the papers produced by students—novice members of an academic discourse community—share many features with texts produced by professional sociolo-

gists, features generally representative of sociological discourse. Moreover, student writing is itself a legitimate and important subject for study, both because of the central role it plays in the process of initiation into a discipline (Bizzell) and because pedagogy can perhaps be improved through an accurate understanding of its features. Moreover, the relative brevity and straightforwardness of student papers make them more amenable to the techniques of inquiry employed in this study than are the complex and often idiosyncratic writings of professional sociologists.

Discourse conventions can regulate both global and local features of texts. Global features include: (1) superstructures (types of discourse, broad generic patterns), (2) macrostructures (gist or line of reasoning), and (3) macropropositions (summarizing statements, categories of information). Local features include: (1) the choice and sequencing of individual statements and pieces of information (micropropositions), and (2) the style of sentences. In both reading and writing activities, decisions at the global level tend to dictate choices at the local level. The present study, therefore, tries to identify disciplinary constraints and conventions governing the higher-level features of undergraduate writing in sociology.

We have not chosen, however, to focus on the most obvious feature of the texts, their formal superstructure. In examining some four hundred student research papers gathered from twelve sociology classes, we concluded that on the level of superstructure, undergraduate research papers in sociology appear to employ a two-part expository structure that they share with student writing in many academic fields. This superstructure consists of a statement of task or problem followed by investigation and proof. Textbooks for undergraduate academic writing also view this structure as basic to research papers in most disciplines, including sociology (Maimon; Sociology Writing Group). Since the superstructure appears to reflect the conventions of academic discourse in general rather than those of sociological discourse, we chose to exclude from the study questions of textual superstructure.

Instead, the study focuses on semantic macrostructures and macropropositions and on the formal features often associated with them. Drawing on evidence from highly rated papers among those gathered for the study and on current research in discourse comprehension, we examine four areas in which student texts in sociology seem likely to be shaped by disciplinary conventions:

> the kinds of information provided in the openings of papers;
> the kinds of information provided in the bodies;
> the semantic macrostructures or lines of reasoning;
> and the macrostructural cues in the bodies of papers.

In addition, the study is guided by two questions:

1. To what extent do university sociology instructors expect student writing to adhere to disciplinary constraints and conventions in each of the areas being examined?
2. What specific semantic or formal conventions can be identified on the basis of responses and evaluative comments the instructors make during the reading of student texts?

Readers

Readers chosen for the study were eight university sociologists, all experienced researchers, whose work represents each of the major approaches in the discipline: survey research and large-scale data analysis; participant observation; and social theory. All were familiar with common approaches to undergraduate instruction in the field and with student writing typically submitted in lower-level sociology courses.

Texts

The texts used in the study were research papers submitted at the end of an introductory sociology course whose aim was to introduce students to the subject matter, assumptions, and methods that characterize sociology as a discipline and separate it from other, related fields, such as psychology or anthropology. This is a typical goal for introductory courses in sociology, one that is reflected as well in widely adopted texts such as Light and Keller's *Sociology* and Eshleman and Cashion's *Sociology: An Introduction*. The paper assignment asked students to choose a subject and an approach characteristic of sociology and to make sure their analysis incorporated key elements of sociological thought. Such an assignment is likewise typical of undergraduate courses in sociology (Sociology Writing Group, 7–29).

The papers employed in the study were generally satisfactory (graded as *A* and *B* by the course instructors and the course supervisor) with no major structural flaws. To discourage overly rigorous fault-finding, we told the participants that the papers were originally graded in the *B* to *A* range, and we corrected any particularly irritating errors in grammar, mechanics, and spelling. Though some readers noted the surface errors that remained, none found them distracting; moreover, with the exception of papers altered in substantial ways (see below), most readers found the papers effective and competently written, though clearly student productions.

The topics of the four papers used in the study represented important areas of contemporary research as well as subjects often covered in introductory courses: mate selection, sex roles, child abuse, and subcultures. The number of papers was limited in order to make possible the comparison of various responses to a text.

Procedures

In individual meetings the participants were given copies of each of the papers and told about aims of the paper assignment and the instructional context. They were asked to verbalize, while reading a paper, both their understanding of what the writer was trying to do or say and their evaluation of the text as a paper for a sociology class.

It took the participants between thirty-five and fifty minutes to read the papers and comment on the reading/evaluation process. Their responses were recorded on audio tape and transcribed for analysis. One of the researchers was present throughout each session in order to take note of overt reading behaviors (scanning the text or rereading a section, for example), to observe body language, and to provide a more accurate estimate of the tone of comments than might be possible from audio tape alone.

Alteration of Texts

In designing this study, we reasoned that omitting or making ambiguous various features of a text would prompt readers to comment on those features they had expected to encounter, thus providing evidence of discourse conventions. We also reasoned that a comparison of readers' comments on altered and unaltered versions of texts might aid in the identification of discourse conventions and their functions. These assumptions were based in part on the recognized tendency of readers to supply canonical interpretations for ambiguous portions of texts (van Dijk and Kintsch) and in part on the observation that skilled readers are able to restore omitted portions of texts with considerable accuracy by drawing on their expectations for the discourse as a whole. The latter pattern of behavior also forms the basis for sentence- and discourse-level cloze tests (Taylor; Kirby; Pollard-Gott and Frase).

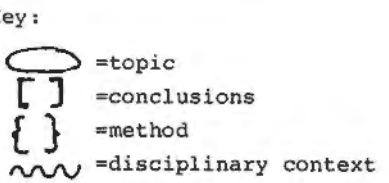
Some of the features we chose to alter were those that an examination of student papers gathered for the study identified as likely to be shaped by the conventions and constraints of discourse in sociology. Drawing on an assumption that the generalized schema for academic research papers in the social sciences and in many other fields specifies paper openings containing slots for four kinds of information—topic, method, disciplinary context, conclusions (Schwegler and Shamoon; Shamoon and Schwegler)—we

identified statements providing these kinds of information in each of the four papers chosen for the study.

In order to determine whether the sociology instructors expected to encounter these four categories of information and in order to determine if they expected the slots to be filled or delimited in a manner unique to sociological discourse, we created altered openings for each of the sample papers. The altered openings eliminated some categories of information and "neutralized" others so that the information presented was unlikely to be regarded as specific to sociology and could easily be viewed as general knowledge about human culture and society. The first version of the paragraph below provides domain-specific information which is omitted or "neutralized" (made more general or ambiguous) in the altered version that follows it (altered sections underlined).

Original Version

In our society, it is assumed that a man and a woman marry because they are in love. Love is seen as a blind, violent, irrational emotion that strikes whomever and wherever it pleases. But when one looks closely, however, he discovers that who a person marries is strongly guided and restricted to similar income, class, education, racial and the religious background of the two people involved (Berger 35). The purpose of my paper, therefore, is to show that mate selection in America is for the most part homogeneous.



Altered Version

Most people assume that a man and a woman marry because they are in love. Love is seen as a blind, violent, irrational emotion that strikes whomever and wherever it pleases. But when one looks closely, he discovers that people generally marry someone whose background is similar to theirs. The purpose of my paper, therefore, is to show that this is often the case in America.

Drawing again on assumptions about the generalized schema for academic discourse (Schwegler and Shamoon; Shamoon and Schwegler), we identified in the sample papers statements representing five categories of information likely to occur in major segments in the bodies of texts, all but the last of which are related to the categories in the opening: data (topic), method, disciplinary context, conclusions, and analysis. Elimination or "neutralization" of information in these categories would have created essays seriously deficient in content, probably unrepresentative of even marginally acceptable student writing. Thus we did not alter statements providing such information and relied instead on responses to the unaltered versions for evidence of whether these slots were filled or delimited in a manner specific to discourse in sociology. The following paragraph from the body of the paper on sex roles illustrates the different categories of information:

In the reading material of school children, the male and female gender roles are observable. Some publishing companies have been issuing identical reading texts with only minor adjustments for over fifty years. [Within these specific reading materials from the first to the fifth grades, men are exhibited in masculine roles usually resembling the achiever. The libraries used by children offer few examples of the female heroines or achievers] (Andreas 31). By the time a girl reaches junior high school she is already inculcated with certain feminine qualities which she should possess. Picturebooks that a girl reads as a child [define the specified sex roles.] The literature at her disposal during pre-adolescence, such as Seventeen magazine which includes forty-three advertisements for engagement rings in each issue, [does not radically alter her view.] Therefore, the roles that children learn through literature are perpetuated and consistently defined by the society as children grow older.

Key: ——— =data
[ ] =analysis
═══ =method
∿∿∿ =disciplinary context

Other features we chose to alter were those that cognitive theories of discourse processing identify as essential both to the process of reading comprehension and to the semantic structure of a text. We reasoned that if disciplinary constraints and conventions play any significant role in shaping student writing, then their effects are likely to be evident in such features.

According to current theory, a reader draws on information in the opening of a text and on prior knowledge to construct a tentative schema to account for a text's anticipated macrostructure (its gist or line of reasoning). This schema also guides subsequent efforts to create a mental image of the text's meaning and to place the details it contains within a meaningful framework (Kucer).

We reasoned that the conventions governing discourse in the field might require a macrostructure (line of reasoning) that was recognizably sociological. Thus the willingness or unwillingness of readers to accept as sociological a text whose projected macrostructure embodies a general rather than domain-specific line of reasoning would be a measure of the constraints upon this aspect of writing. We also noted that the effect of altered and unaltered openings on readers' ability to identify a domain-specific macrostructure would help indicate the role played by features of the openings.

In creating a mental image of a text's meaning, readers rely on macrostructural cues and macropropositions in the body of the discourse to confirm the tentative schema identified or constructed earlier in the comprehension process. The sample papers used in this study are all characterized by strong macrostructural cues, generally containing discipline-specific concepts and technical terms. These appear most often in the form of boundary statements at the beginning or ending of paragraphs. Typically, these statements signal the evolving line of reasoning and also contain macropropositions in the form of statements summarizing the propositional content of the paragraph:

> Language is another powerful characteristic of subculture. As with most other subcultures, the Amish have their own language and are uniquely influenced by it.
>
> The Amish maintain their subculture through strict, comprehensive regulations called the Regal and Ordnung. (Hostetler, 52)

Moreover, the texts sometimes provide additional macrostructural cues in the middle of paragraphs in the form of technical terms or of brief statements that reinforce the boundary statements:

> Their homogeneousness leads to another form of isolation and another method of maintaining their subculture. . . . Psychologi-

> cally, homogeneousness has instilled in the Amish a preference for tradition rather than science. . . .

To explore the extent to which sociology instructors expected to encounter strong, discipline-specific macrostructural cues in the bodies of student papers and to identify as well the role of the cues in helping readers tentatively identify and confirm domain-specific macrostructures, we omitted or "neutralized" these features in some versions of the sample papers. Even with boundary statements and other strong cues removed or modified, however, most paragraphs in the altered texts remained unified, coherent segments of discourse. Most also retained a statement that could function as a topic sentence in a general informative report, as is the case with the following paragraphs (omitted elements underlined and new topic sentence bracketed):

The Amish have learned that music is an excellent medium to arouse emotion and enthusiasm for their way of life. Group singing is a source of community activity; it is both socially and psychologically rewarding. The Old Order Amish hymns stir up emotional support and identification with the traditional way of life. Also, the method of transmitting hymns from generation to generation reflects the Amish belief in practice rather than theory and book learning. Their music is passed on, not through written notes, but by oral communication. [Like everything else in the Amish life, music shows the strength of the Amish religion and serves to strengthen it further.]

Most importantly, to preserve their subculture, the Amish must have a means of enforcing their rules and order. ("Neutralized" version = [Finally, the Amish have a means of enforcing their rules and orders]). Major violations are leaving the church and marrying an outsider. These practices, contradictory and threatening to the Amish way of life, are dealt with by excommunication and shunning, until the offender repents. Excommunication is the method of spiritually separating the offender from the community; shunning is the practice of physically disassociating with the offender.

Once cut off in this manner, the offender must leave the community or repent in order to have some kind of human interaction. Fearful of being totally on his own, the sinner often repents. In this way, the community places tremendous pressure on its members to conform, reduces deviation, and avoids attrition.

The sample papers used in the study thus appeared in three versions:

O (opening altered; body intact)
B (body altered; opening intact)
OB (opening and body altered)

Each version was read by at least two participants, and no reader encountered two versions of the same paper.

Results and Discussion

There is considerable evidence in the readers' responses to altered and unaltered openings that the sociology instructors expected to encounter the four general categories (slots) of information and that they also expected these slots to be filled with specifically sociological information, configured in ways that also mark the text as specifically sociological.

In responding to unaltered openings, readers frequently commented on the presence of information in the four categories and on its sociological nature:

> Good definition of functionalist theory [disciplinary context] and its relation to the topic of the paper [method].

> Students often look at child abuse from a psychological perspective, but this student seems to be dealing with it sociologically [topic and method].

At the same time, the instructors did not complain about any category of information missing from the openings or about any rhetorical operations they failed to perform, such as stating a thesis. Nor did they comment on the stylistic qualities. This pattern of response suggests that their expectations for the openings were focused primarily on the kind and quality of the information presented.

In commenting on altered openings, the instructors did not isolate individual categories of missing information. Instead they remarked about the lack of specific detail and the failure to provide a sociological focus. Readers also isolated statements they considered too general and frequently rephrased them, even constructing missing elements through inference:

> "Many people with similar backgrounds" is vague. What the student really wanted to say here is "propinquity" or "heterogamous marriage." This would make the purpose of the paper a lot clearer.

In restating a phrase like "opposites attract" as "a romantic theory of heterosexual attraction" or "fifty-year-old children's best sellers" as "intergenerational literature," the instructors revealed an expectation that the informational slots in the openings of the papers are to be filled with concepts and details belonging specifically and obviously to the domain of sociology.

Some of the comments suggest even more precise limitations on the information filling the slots. References to disciplinary context, for example, must be to reasonably current research. Methods must be drawn from the set of analytic methods and tools generally considered appropriate to the discipline. And topics must be drawn from the set of topics and problems defined by the discipline as worthy of discussion and as amenable to the methods of the field—as sociological problems, for example, rather than subjects appropriate for psychological or anthropological analysis. Or they must be drawn from an even more restricted set of topics, those recognized as appropriate for student research papers: "Aha, sex roles, I was waiting for this one . . ."; "Yes, child beating, I knew we'd get to it."

Readers' responses also point to the importance of the five categories (slots) of information in the bodies of texts. The instructors noted with approval the presence of information in each of the five slots—data, method, disciplinary context, conclusions, and analysis—and they evaluated the information's appropriateness to the line of reasoning employed in the text. The comments do not indicate if readers expected all five kinds of information to appear in each paragraph or similar developmental segment of a text. They do indicate, however, that the instructors expected the information to perform two main functions, each related to the line of reasoning displayed in the text.

Statements of data, method, and disciplinary context were expected to perform *evidentiary* functions, providing support, expansion, and qualification for the argument and assertions structuring an essay. Readers' comments suggested further that they expected the information in each slot to be governed by criteria of appropriateness, currency, consistency,

and sufficiency based on disciplinary standards and appropriate to the line of reasoning followed in the text. The following are typical comments:

> The research that is being cited here is pretty controversial. In fact, all the data in this field is tainted by issues of sampling techniques. A student ought to know that.
>
> Now this student is looking at evidence from the *New York Times* society page. Actually that is class bound; there is lots of other evidence around that goes across class boundaries. This stuff is all over the place.
>
> This information on child abusers having been abused is from psychology. It is not sociological information. It doesn't belong in this paper.
>
> This material sounds like it's from psychology. Ah yes, Bettelheim. It's really not appropriate here.

Conclusions and statements of analysis (statements applying the method to data) were expected to perform *analytical* or *interpretive* functions such as exploring the evidence and drawing conclusions about it. Readers often moved from identifying kinds of evidence to commenting on the presence (or absence) of statements of analysis and interpretation: "Now look at this passage with the quotes from children's books. That's good data. Now let's see what is done with it. There ought to be more than just listing it."

The instructors' remarks also illustrated the extent to which both disciplinary conventions and the semantic strategies of an essay require statements of analysis and interpretation and also constrain them in form and content:

> This paper is describing the features of subculture. It should include some analysis. A paper like this has to do more than describe. It would have been interesting if the paper had taken the indicators of subculture and applied them; instead it just described.

In addition, readers generally looked for commentary on the data in an essay or for manipulation of it: "Ah, finally, it looks like we're finally getting an analysis of certain texts." At the same time, they expected recognition of the scholarly context, especially acknowledgment of conflicting interpretations, of questions that have been raised about the reliability of the data or about the soundness of the method: "Now this is pretty controversial stuff. But the student is writing it as if moving from note card to note card which is a summary of a source. But there is plenty

to focus on in this area. I want to see some awareness of the complexity in this subject."

Finally, the sociologists made it clear that they expected statements of analysis and interpretation to conform with the assumptions and perspectives of the discipline. Statements reflecting value systems other than those of sociology were dismissed, often with considerable force, as unsociological and unscientific:

> This is a personal comment. I teach objectivity. They are beginners and they don't know how to make an objective analysis, so I don't let them make personal comments.

> What I see here is "female-headed households" and "single parents." Now this is value-laden language. It's close to personal preconceptions which I don't allow in the paper. In fact, this whole issue is tied to low income status. That's the real issue. It would have been correct to see it from that perspective.

The willingness of readers to forgive the student writers for slips and false starts so evident during the reading of the openings seemed to disappear in the middle of the texts. Instead of restoring missing or ambiguous elements from their own knowledge, the instructors applied stringent disciplinary standards to the categories of information presented in the bodies and were quite willing to reject writing they felt did not meet the standards for student discourse in sociology.

On the basis of what appeared to be initial, general schema activated by information about the classroom context and the paper assignment, the sociology instructors approached the student texts looking for categories of information appropriate to sociological discourse. Their comments reveal, however, that as soon as possible they attempted to identify or construct a schema to account for the text's probable macrostructure. There is considerable evidence in both the readers' remarks and their evaluations of individual essays that they expected the probable (and actual) macrostructures to be discipline-specific and that they considered any paper lacking a discipline-specific macrostructure to be unacceptable as sociological discourse.

At the end of unaltered openings and of altered openings for which they were able to infer sociological content, readers paused. Appearing to draw on information from the text, from their knowledge of the discipline, and from prior experience with student writing, they attempted to predict the gist of the upcoming text:

> Okay, here is a structuralist-functionalist perspective on sexual identity. Now I expect a paper like this to continue to . . .

> Yes, okay, this is correct. What this student is saying is that people think that romantic love accounts for why they choose the person they want to marry, but that factors such as common heritage and background are more important. That is absolutely right.

Though the predicted macrostructures probably function as hypotheses to guide the process of comprehension, most of the instructors' comments seem to present them instead as constraints upon the writer: "Now the student is saying that the Amish as a subculture differ in clothing, in farming techniques, in language and so on. Okay, if they want to say that, I expect this paper to say also that there are similarities with the main culture."

In short, the instructors seem to expect that student writing in sociology will follow a line of reasoning characteristic of sociological thought. They appear to project on an essay a macrostructural pattern that is characteristic of sociological discourse and to view this as a standard for measuring the student's achievement and for determining whether or not the remainder of the text is acceptable as student writing in the discipline:

> So what they're saying here is "Let's have a look at intergenerational literature." Now I expect this paper to go on to tell me just how important literature is as a variable in development.

The conventional character of these patterns to which the student writers were expected to adhere was made plain in many of the instructor's comments. The patterns appeared to have two sources. One source was the approaches commonly employed in the professional literature of the field:

> This is a definition applied to understand certain social phenomena, something Spradley does very well in his book on alcoholics as a subculture.

The other source was the patterns generally considered to be appropriate for student writing in sociology courses:

> This is a common kind of paper, one in which the student looks at a lot of different perspectives on a puzzling phenomenon and it's particularly common with topics like child abuse which this student is talking about.

One sign of the strength of the readers' expectations for a discipline-specific macrostructure is their apparent willingness to suspend judgment about a text's probable direction throughout the reading of an altered opening until the body of the text indicates that the line of reasoning will be sociological: "I now see what is going on in this paper. Perhaps the first full page is not what the writer wanted to speak about."

Readers may well be able to adopt a tentative schema for a general interest informative report on the basis of the kind of information provided in the altered openings, but the comments of participants did not reveal any willingness to do this even as a way of rejecting an essay as unsociological. Moreover, despite the specific expectations readers held for information in the openings of essays, they considered texts with altered openings and intact bodies generally satisfactory and were willing to forgive the writers for failing initially to provide the appropriate kinds of information. Thus although there appear to be clear conventions governing the openings of student papers in sociology, they probably can be followed with some flexibility. In contrast, strong, discipline-specific macrostructural cues in the bodies of papers would appear to be necessary elements of acceptable student texts in sociology, at least according the responses of the readers in the study. Those papers with altered openings but intact macrostructural cues were considered acceptable by the readers because the information in the bodies of the essays enabled them to arrive at and confirm sociological macrostructures for the texts. Yet those papers with intact openings but altered bodies were considered unacceptable even if readers were able to arrive at an initial prediction of the macrostructure:

> The opening promised one thing, and the body did not live up to it. It promised to look at the role of children's lit. in sex role formation, but it was purely descriptive. It only used a few sources. It was not well organized either.

And papers with both altered openings and altered bodies were deemed entirely unacceptable, of course.

It is important to remember that papers lacking strong macrostructural cues retained considerable information, enough, one might conjecture, to allow readers to infer missing elements, much as they did in response to the altered openings. None of the readers chose to do this, however. The altered bodies also retained topic sentences that might be construed as signalling a general-interest informative report. While some readers appeared to recognize this possibility, they rejected it as inappropriate, regarding it as the kind of paper assembled from textbooks and encyclopedias:

> You know, I don't know what the specific assignment was, but it looks as if the class was using a few textbooks, something like Light and Keller or Hoestetter. I have that one on my shelf right here, and it looks as if the student is putting a paper together from that.

The presence or absence of discipline-specific macrostructural cues also seemed to affect readers' perceptions of categories of information presented in the discussions. In reading unaltered bodies, readers commented on the quality of the evidence and analysis. In reading the altered bodies, however, they not only failed to take note of the evidence, they also complained about the lack of statements of analysis and interpretation – even though such statements were generally retained in the texts.

Disciplinary macrostructural cues may have encouraged readers to accept a text as sociological discourse, but they did not guarantee approval of the quality of the reasoning:

> So, now the paper is presenting material from children's books as a means of supporting the idea of sex role reinforcement, but what they are not saying is let's look at how that factor interacts with other family and social factors. This line of argument would be more effective if it considered literature as one of many determining factors in psycho-social development.

Nonetheless, the ability of readers to perceive the macrostructure of a text as appropriate to sociological reasoning and the presence of strong, discipline-specific macrostructural cues guiding the process of comprehension both appear to be essential conventions of student discourse in sociology.

Conclusions

Based on the richness and suggestiveness of responses to the texts used in the study, the practice of altering texts to elicit comments revealing readers' expectations would seem to be a useful method for investigating the conventions and constraints governing discourse in an interpretive community. Much of what goes on in the mind of readers remains unsaid, of course, but the process does offer revealing insights into the reader-text transaction.

The responses of the participants indicate clearly, moreover, that in terms of semantic structures, sociology instructors expect student writing to adhere to disciplinary constraints and conventions. This is particularly true in the case of the textual macrostructure, the gist or line of reasoning. And it is true also of semantic elements on a slightly lower level, macrostructural cues and macropropositions, particularly in the bodies of texts. Macropropositions designating categories of information in the openings of texts are more variable elements, however. This is perhaps a reflection of their role as a bridge between the general schema readers

bring with them from the contexts of the task and the specific schema they adopt in the act of reading.

Though the discourse conventions identified in this study include slots for information, it would be a mistake to conceive of the texts discussed here as general frames filled with sociological content. At their highest level, that of the semantic macrostructure, student texts that met with the approval of the instructors were shaped almost completely by the assumptions and constraints of the discipline. The same is true of other high-level elements including many of the macropropositions. Yet it is also true that at this level the categories or slots filled with sociological information bear general resemblance to those in other texts. This should not be surprising given the broad similarities on such general patterns as statement and support that exist among even such clearly different disciplines as literary criticism, business management, physical anthropology, and sociology. Nonetheless, the internal configurations or delimitations of the categories of information in the sociology texts and their relationships to each other and to the semantic macrostructure are so constrained by disciplinary conventions and assumptions that they, too, can be regarded as shaped to a great extent by the discourse patterns of the discipline.

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