

**Principles of Textual Communication.
On the Basis of Polish Press Reports after
President Obama's 2009 Inauguration**

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Abstract: On the basis of the assumption that any discourse is a highly context-dependent, and dynamically changing phenomenon of textual nature, and with reference to the fact that there may be used in linguistic research certain standards of textuality, the paper shows that the standards can be grouped into, *e.g.*, three general sections (text-oriented, sender-oriented and context-oriented) which can be used as a starting point for further research in the study of textlinguistics and journalistic discourse.

Keywords: discourse studies, textlinguistics, textuality standards, President Barack Obama.

1. On standards of textuality

In their *Introduction to Textlinguistics* de Beaugrande and Dressler attempt to provide an answer to the issue of textuality¹. They state that: "(...) a language is a VIRTUAL system of available options not yet in use, the text is an ACTUAL system in which options have been taken from their repertoires and utilized in a particular STRUCTURE (relationship between or among elements). This utilization is carried out via procedures of ACTUALIZATION" (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 35). This definition is similar to my point of view in the way that it stresses the fact that a text is a singular realization of a particular discourse, and any text production is conditioned by its immediate nonverbal context. In other words, any speaker makes his linguistic choice based on non-linguistic circumstances. De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 3) also state that any text is a communicative occurrence that is supposed to meet certain standards of textuality in order to be communicative (non-communicative occurrences are treated as non-texts by them). It is not fully explicit in their discussion whether partially communicative occurrences (*e.g.* messages directed for particular receivers, as for instance gang graffiti) could be regarded as texts. They enlist seven standards of textuality: cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality and intertextuality. They call them after Searle (1969: 33) *constitutive principles of textual communication*, for the reason that: "(...) [t]hey define and create the form of behaviour identifiable as textual communicating, and if they are defied, that form of behaviour will break down" (De Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 11). They also adopt Searle's notion of regulative principles (*i.e.* the principles of efficiency, effectiveness and appropriateness) that are not so much as to define, as to control textual communication (*ibid.*). I will briefly describe their textuality standards, or to use a more appropriate expression: "the principles of communication", for even though the constitutive principles of textual communication are also called by the authors "standards of textuality", their concepts evidently transcend the notion of text and it seems that at least some of them should rather be researched as contextual processes influencing text composition.

¹ Parts of the paper were already presented in Chruszczewski (2002: 30-34).

The first two principles of textual communication – cohesion and coherence, are very much text-centered. “[**Cohesion**] concerns the ways in which the actual words we hear or see [the so called *surface text* – P.C.], are *mutually connected within a sequence*. The surface components depend upon each other according to grammatical forms and conventions, such that cohesion rests upon GRAMMATICAL DEPENDENCIES” (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 3).

There happen, however, ambiguities as regards the words people perceive, but they are most often quickly resolved due to the fact that what is heard is not of vital importance with regard to understanding, and “there must be INTERACTION between cohesion and the other standards of textuality to make communication efficient” (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 4). As the second “standard of textuality” de Beaugrande and Dressler point at coherence which actually goes beyond the text boundary, because its very definition refers to cognitive aspects linked with texts by means of concepts and relations. “[**Coherence**] (...) concerns the ways in which the components of the TEXTUAL WORLD, *i.e.* the configuration of CONCEPTS and RELATIONS which *underlie* the surface text, are mutually *accessible* and *relevant*. A CONCEPT is definable as a configuration of knowledge (cognitive content) which can be recovered or activated with more or less unity and consistency in the mind. RELATIONS and the LINKS between concepts which appear together in a textual world: each link would bear a designation of the concept it connects to” (*ibid.*). In order to illustrate the notions of cohesion and coherence de Beaugrande and Dressler give the example of a text placed by traffic authorities on road signs, namely:

- SLOW
- CHILDREN
- AT PLAY.

They argue that there would be no sense in placing:

- CHILDREN
- PLAY
- SLOW AT,

for drivers “could hardly tell what goes with what”; and add that “(...) the grammatical dependencies in the surface text are major signals for sorting out meanings and uses” (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 3). It is mentioned that the road sign might be understood as “retarded children at play”, but no driver would probably take it seriously. The reason for this being mainly the situational embedding enhancing or rather directing at the exact understanding of the text as: “children may be playing in the street and may unexpectedly appear before your car; you will bump into them unless you reduce speed” (*ibid.*).

As regards coherence being rather “the outcome of cognitive processes among text users”, where “the simple juxtaposition of events and situations in a text will activate operations which recover or create coherence relations” (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 6); the more exact descriptions of “events and situations” we have, or the more exactly defined embeddings of texts we can obtain, the more precise would be the “operations which recover or create coherence relations”, and the more precise the researched discourse could be.

Coming back to the road sign and its concepts de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 4) say that “in ‘children at play,’ ‘children’ is an *object* concept and ‘play’ an *action* concept, and the relation <<agent – of>> obtains, because the children are the agents of the action”. Where the agent is seen as “the force – possessing entity, that performs an action and thus changes a situation” (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 95). Actions are defined as “events intentionally brought by an agent” (*ibid.*). One may distinguish other relations influencing textual coherence like cause, purpose, time, *etc.*, however they will not be discussed in detail because they are not of fundamental importance in this short work.

Intentionality is said to be the third standard of textuality and in line with **acceptability** and **informativity** can be called (with informativity to a lesser degree) “user-centered notions”. The first one of the three “concerning the text producer’s attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text instrumental in fulfilling the producer’s intentions, *e.g.* to distribute knowledge or attain a GOAL specified in a PLAN”. The second one “concerning the text

receiver's attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text having some use or relevance for the receiver, *e.g.* to acquire knowledge or provide co-operation in a plan". The third one concerning "the extent to which the occurrences of the presented text are expected vs. unexpected or known vs. unknown/certain" (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 7-9). With regard to the above textuality standards one must note that they may be transgressed. The standard of intentionality can be violated by means of false starts, instances of retardation, *etc.*, which occur in the course of narration, but the communication will not be disturbed, even though the Gricean maxim of quantity is often not fulfilled. De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 7) say that "users normally exercise TOLERANCE towards products whose conditions of occurrence make it hard to uphold cohesion and coherence altogether, notably in casual conversation". In other words, people simply behave verbally in this way paying no attention to Grice's principle of cooperation or de Beaugrande and Dressler's "intentionality standard", which does not mean that they are not communicative. It is not certain whether partially non-communicative occurrences are texts or non-texts for the authors. One can deduce that they would rather see all of them fulfilled to call some linguistic occurrence a text. Nevertheless, we have previously said that a text can occur regardless of its hearer, addressee or receiver (in some instances the speaker becomes the receiver/hearer of his/her texts) (see also Grice 1975). If there is no receiver to "acquire knowledge" of the developed text, it still fulfills its representative function and does constitute a text even breaking the "acceptability standard". A very similar occurrence may take place when, as de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 9) say "receivers' processing becomes overloaded to the point of endangering communication", or in other words the Gricean maxim of quality is broken, thus the standard would not be properly fulfilled, communication would be severely disturbed, however it does not seem that we would not be faced with a text. The text would be hardly communicative, but we would not refuse to call it a text, because it still could be meaningful in certain embeddings.

The two last standards of textuality the authors present, are **situationality** and **intertextuality**. The former one "concerns the factors which make a text RELEVANT to a SITUATION of occurrence" and the latter one "concerns the factors which make the utilization of one text dependent upon knowledge of one or more previously encountered texts" (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 9, 10). In my opinion both the abovementioned surpass the notion of text. Situationality seems to be more of an outside-text notion than of a text-dependent one. It is due to the situation that people create texts and not vice versa. It is often the case that "the sense and use of the text are decided via the situation" (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 10). This is, however, of secondary importance, and concerns the addressees of the text, who are supposed to understand it, or in other words, the addressee must use his own knowledge to bring textual elements into a meaningful whole. "This operation involves supplying reasonable concepts and relations, to fill in a GAP or DISCONTINUITY in a textual world" (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 6, 101). But one ought to keep in mind that it is primarily the speaker/producer of the text that happens to be in a particular situation or knows of such a situation and other characteristic features of the other elements of the context, which allows him to prepare an appropriate text. The text is prepared owing to the "intertextuality standards": "the ways in which the production and reception (...) depends upon the participants' knowledge (or its lack – P.C.) of other text" (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 182). In other words, it depends also (among other elements) on the social stratum of his speaker and even more so on the social stratum of the hearers/addressees. One must also remember that there are many social groups within social strata. This issue becomes very important in situations when speakers are face to face with their addressees who are expected to react in a particular way after having heard the text. The usage of particular (and appealing) texts is essential in discourses where verbal means are the only way of influencing the addressees' behavior (for example during election campaigns). Norman Fairclough (1992: 85) notes that: "[t]he concept of intertextuality sees texts historically as transforming the past – existing conventions and prior texts – into the present". In this way it is to be seen that also intertextuality is in a way an outside-text notion, since it can be examined only with reference to other, already existing texts (known to the addresser and the addressee), whose elements have been used to create a new one. Both situationality and intertextuality are considered to be very important elements in discourse research. In order to illustrate the above principles of textual communication, even though I do not totally adhere to all of them, I would like to use the example of three particular texts located by Polish main roads on 350 city billboards in 21 Polish cities in August 1999. The distribution of the texts was caused by the

highest death rates in Europe among young drivers and such was also the leading theme (“Young drivers”) of the strategy of making youngsters aware of the dangers lurking for them in the streets. As regards the used texts:

[The inscription “your new limousine after the accident” is to be seen against the background of a wheelchair, the slogan “your new (girl) friend after the accident” is located next to the crutches, and the slogan “your new drinks after the accident” has been printed next to the hospital drip. (Łuczak and Szczęśny 1999: 26; translated into English by – P.C.)]

The three slogans are definitely communicative units, being singular realizations of, as it seems, didactic discourse. They are verbal, meaningful and recorded textual units that fulfill the characteristic functions of texts. They are cohesive according to Polish grammatical standards and coherent; the texts activate cognitive processes among those who receive the messages and while juxtaposed with the situational features like, for instance: narrow Polish roads of generally low quality, with many dangerously speeding young drivers in their second-hand cars. The texts are thought to be fully informative while being just one-sentence-long each. With respect to intertextuality, one can easily notice one informal word with a double meaning in each of the texts. The words are as follows: *bryka* (a limousine/wheelchair), *laska* (a girl-friend/crutches), *drinki* (drinks), and by means of these words, very often used by teenagers, the addresser intended not only to make them aware of the possible dangers they could encounter while driving but also send them the following information: “If you happen to behave here and now in an unreasonable way and do not slow down you will soon call these objects respectively: your new car, friend and drinks; so drive carefully!”

As regards the regulative principles of de Beaugrande and Dressler, it appears that the texts are appropriate to the situation and their chances of success in being obtained via single sentences shown against the particular background were rather high. Having in mind “intentionality” and “acceptability” one might wonder whether by distribution of the information receivers have acquired any knowledge. Research should be conducted concerning the issues that aim at stating what kind of drivers paid attention to the information, and what was their reaction to the messages (did they laugh or reduce their speed, or perhaps did they accelerate to indicate that it did not concern them). Such research would undoubtedly require the use of certain elements of sociological methodology to be fully successful. It is to be observed that in such a case where there are verbal texts and images accompanying them (or even being constitutive parts of the information to be communicated) the application of the discussed “textuality standards” may not be sufficient because one would have to research the entire “semiotic act” (van Leeuwen 1993: 214) (the verbal text and the image, both constituting the information to be communicated in a particular situation to a particular group of addressees). I think that at least some of de Beaugrande and Dressler’s “principles of textual communication”, like for instance “intertextuality” and “situationality” definitely transcend the notion of textuality and can be researched as belonging to another compound element of discursive communication, *i.e.* context which is a significant nonverbal part of communication.

2. Research data

The analyzed linguistic corpus comprises the following dailies published on Wednesday, January 21st, 2009, *i.e.*, the day after President Barack Obama’s inauguration: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Dziennik*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Gazeta Wroclawska*, *Nasz Dziennik*. This particular date was chosen because of the fact that the American presidential election always gets very large media coverage in Poland, and as a result, as could be seen, on this particular day even those who hardly ever read daily newspapers went to their local kiosks to buy one.

2.1.

Gazeta Wyborcza (one of the most popular Polish dailies; center / right wing; circulation: 433 000; price 1.80 PLN; altogether 32 pages plus additionally on Wednesdays a real estate section, and local news); www.wyborcza.pl.

The cover text, pages 1 – 5 (by Marcin Bosacki from Washington, D.C., and Bartosz Węglarczyk from Warsaw – editorial):

Textuality standards of the researched text:

[text-oriented]

- a. Cohesion (high)
- b. Coherence (high)

[sender-oriented]

- c. Informativity (very high, pages 1-5, many pictures)
- d. Intentionality (very clear, huge front headline “OBAMA”)
- e. Intertextuality (moderate)

[context-oriented]

- f. Acceptability (high)
- g. Situationality (relevant)
- h. Target group (educated, middle class)
- i. Target culture (Polish)

2.2.

Dziennik (one of the most popular Polish dailies; right wing; price 2 PLN; 28 pages); www.dziennik.pl

The cover text, pages 1 – 3 (by Radosław Korzycki from Washington, D.C., Jaromir Kamiński, and Michał Potocki from Warsaw):

Textuality standards of the researched text:

[text-oriented]

- a. Cohesion (high)
- b. Coherence (high)

[sender-oriented]

- c. Informativity (high, pages 1-3, many pictures)
- d. Intentionality (clear, front headline: “President Obama”)
- e. Intertextuality (moderate)

[context-oriented]

- f. Acceptability (high)
- g. Situationality (relevant)
- h. Target group (educated, middle class)
- i. Target culture (Polish)

2.3.

Rzeczpospolita (quite popular Polish daily; right wing; price 3.40 PLN; section A [news] – 28 pages [in white], section B [economy and market] – 16 pages [in light green], section C [law everyday] – 20 pages [in yellow]).

The cover text, page A1 (by Piotr Gillert from Washington, D.C.):

Textuality standards of the researched text:

[text-oriented]

- a. Cohesion (high)
- b. Coherence (high)

[sender-oriented]

- c. Informativity (high; pages A1, A8, A9, A10, A11, few pictures)
- d. Intentionality (clear, front headline: “Obama’s New America”)
- e. Intertextuality (relatively high)

[context-oriented]

- f. Acceptability (moderate)
- g. Situationality (relevant)
- h. Target group (educated, upper middle class)
- i. Target culture (Polish)

2.4.

Gazeta Wroclawska (Lower Silesia local daily; price 1.50 PLN; 28 pages).

No cover text, just President Obama’s photo and information sending the reader to page 10. Page 10: two texts: by Łukasz Słapek; and by Jakub Mielnik, both from Wrocław.

Textuality standards of the researched text:

[text-oriented]

- a. Cohesion (high)
- b. Coherence (moderate)

[sender-oriented]

- c. Informativity (low, page 10, few pictures)
- d. Intentionality (relatively low, bottom front page headline: “Barack Obama 44th President of the USA)
- e. Intertextuality (low)

[context-oriented]

- f. Acceptability (moderate)
- g. Situationality (moderate)
- h. Target group (local lower middle class)

i. Target culture (Polish)

2.5.

Nasz Dziennik (ultra right wing [supposedly Roman-Catholic]; price 1.70 PLN; 16 pages); www.naszdziennik.pl

A small cover text at the bottom of the first page, with President Obama's photo and information sending the reader to page 7. Page 7: two texts, both by Łukasz Sianożęcki.

Textuality standards of the researched text:

[text-oriented]

- a. Cohesion (high)
- b. Coherence (moderate)

[sender-oriented]

- c. Informativity (low, only partially pages 1 and 7)
- d. Intentionality (very low, no first page headline)
- e. Intertextuality (high with references to American dailies)

[context-oriented]

- f. Acceptability (rather low)
- g. Situationality (low, President Obama's inauguration is made to seem unimportant)
- h. Target group (mostly blue collar pensioners)
- i. Target culture (Polish, Roman-Catholic)

On the basis of the above data it can be observed that cohesion and coherence standards of all the news reports are consistently high. Informativity, intentionality and intertextuality standards are high as regards large-budget national dailies, with a dramatic decrease when one considers regional (*Gazeta Wroclawska*) or niche and biased (*Nasz Dziennik*) news reports. A similar tendency is seen when one looks at the acceptability and situationality standards which are rather high for large-budget middle class dailies and rapidly fall when one considers niche daily news reports. Having the above in mind, the conclusion is an optimistic one. Even though the national readership rates are not very high in Poland, those who anyhow do read newspapers select mainly professionally prepared and well regarded, because of their balanced commentaries, large-budget national daily newspapers.

3. Conclusion

In the light of the material presented one may reach the conclusion that the seven textuality standards of Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler (*i.e.*, cohesion, coherence, informativity, intentionality, intertextuality, acceptability, and situationality) can be grouped into the three following sections of: text-oriented, sender-oriented, and context-oriented standards. Regarding the standards presented as basic components of a much larger textuality-research model, one can divide large texts into smaller sections and make a cross-textual comparative analysis of, for example, particular news reports. It is also quite visible that the standards presented are not yet complete, and can be regarded as just a starting point for further research, and development in the study of textlinguistics and journalistic discourse.

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