

Language, culture and communication

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Published in:
Strategic Corporate Communication

Publication date:
2000

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Renkema, J. (2000). Language, culture and communication: introduction. In C. B. M. van Riel (Ed.), *Strategic Corporate Communication: a selection of articles by Belgian and Dutch authors in leading international journals* (pp. 275-279). Alphen aan den Rijn: Samson.

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Part 4

Language, Culture and Communication

J. Renkema

The three articles in this section provide an accurate picture of new developments in Discourse Studies. Taking a well-known communication model as their starting point, they describe refinements based on subsequent analyses of written and oral communication in specific contexts.

The sender-message-receiver model

It's a long time since researchers in discourse studies were constantly referring to the communication model of Shannon and Weaver (1949). This simple sender-message-receiver model was, in the days when the telephone was the most modern means of communication, an appropriate metaphor to explain how content in written or oral form is transmitted from a writer/speaker to a reader/listener. In the eighties this model was refined. See for example Akmajian et al. (1980) where the concept of receiver as merely an information processing system is criticized. A reader or listener does much more than just process information. As they "absorb" the contents, other factors come into play, such as their opinion of the source or sender and the reader's prior knowledge. In an introduction to discourse studies from the early nineties (Renkema, 1993), it is pointed out that this model is too simplistic and should be supplemented by elements from speech act theory (what does the sender want to achieve with the message?) and that the ambiguity of the message should be taken into account (a message can be interpreted in different ways).

When we survey the research from the last few years, we discover new refinements in a type of research in which ecological validity is an important extra criterion.

Changes in the eighties and nineties

The old communication model is, in fact, in its most simple form a tri-chotomy.

S * message * R

The refinements which took place in the eighties can be represented schematically as follows:

S (? !) * m/e/s/s/a/g/e * R: (r1, r2, r3, etc.)

The S is more than just the source of a signal or a message. The S has an intention, desires, etc. (represented by a question mark and an exclamation mark). These too need to be dealt with in ongoing research. The message is ambiguous and therefore open to numerous interpretations, which partly depend on who is reading it. Therefore, there is not just one R, but r1 with a particular attitude, r2 and r3 with more or less prior knowledge, and so on.

The refinements which took place in the nineties can be represented schematically as follows:

* m/e/s/s/a/g/e *

The rest of this introduction discusses changes compared to the situation in the eighties. Four trends can be discerned.

Multi-authored texts

Many texts are the joint product of several writers. A purely cognitive approach to the production process can be limited to what goes on in the writer's mind, but when there are several writers, the interaction between them must be an object of investigation as well. The splitting up of R in the eighties has been followed by a splitting up of S in the nineties.

Reader responses

Second, the ultimate question concerning the processing of text is how the reader or listener reacts to the message. Not only prior knowledge is important, but also the effect in terms of attitude and behavior. The ultimate question is how the receiver responds to the text: does the reader think or act in accordance with the intention of S? The increase in attention to the intentions of S in the eighties has been followed by an increase in attention to effects on R in the nineties.

A focus on content

Third, the concept "message" appears to require further specification. Attention to aspects of form and the relation between form and content led to less attention to other aspects which are also important to the transfer of information. When people want to transfer certain contents, then the choice of genre (family round robin vs. video presentation, for example) is of great importance, as is the content of arguments or the decision to add different kinds of information, such as anecdotal information. The content of messages depends to some extent to S's intentions and R's needs. The closer attention in the eighties to for-

mal aspects of the message was followed in the nineties by further research into several aspects of content.

Research methodology

The fourth trend has to do with the research methodology. We increasingly observe that special attention is being paid to investigations of texts in use. There seems to be an increasing preference for descriptive case studies within a real-life context in which a text is sent and received. In experimental inquiries too, more and more attention is being paid to ecological validity. This change is symbolically represented in the representation for the nineties by the overarching C for context. The attention to the transfer of information in the eighties has been placed in a more and more realistic research environment in the nineties.

These are, in broad outlines, the trends in discourse studies in the nineties. The following three articles provide a good illustration of those trends. The subject of the first article is the writing process in the workplace. The article comprises a literature study and an analysis of a situation in which a joint report had to be written within an institutional context. This is an example of an S inquiry. The second deals with an agricultural education project in Tanzania and discusses the question as to what extent staff can adjust their message to the needs of the farmers. This is an example of a message inquiry. The third article is about media research and deals with the question as to what extent rectifications have an influence on the reader. This is an example of an R inquiry.

An S inquiry

In the first article an interesting remark is more or less hidden in a preliminary conclusion: the quality of a text is often reduced in the theory to text-internal characteristics such as cohesion and correctness, whereas in real life quality seems to be determined more by text-external factors such as the company culture. More and more often different employees or departments share responsibility for one text. Remarkably, little is known about this method of text production. That is why in this contribution, after a thorough literature study, an intriguing case study is discussed. What really happens when officials, experts, and spokesmen have to write a text together? The article points out that the joint writing process can be seen as four categories: brainware, hardware, groupware and documentware. Further analysis points out that the management of such a writing process leaves much to be desired and that there is more attention to the document itself than to the goal of the text. This contribution calls for a theoretical framework in which cognitive as well as social components of the writing process are combined.

A message inquiry

In the second contribution the message is central: how can an information campaign be improved? The Ministry of Agriculture in Tanzania was certain that it was on the right track with its information campaigns, but nevertheless wanted to check whether their effectiveness could be increased. In this inquiry, the pattern of communication between information officials and farmers was carefully examined in interviews. The analyses show that there are such large differences in education, wealth, property, and market access among farmers that giving general advice is useless. A very interesting aspect of this inquiry is that a target group analysis results in advice on a different type of message, and that this advice is linked to a suggestion to introduce changes in the Information Service itself. This article is particularly suitable for illustrating how an analysis of the R component can result in suggestions for changes in the Message component that can only be introduced after changes in the S component.

An R inquiry

The third contribution deals with the effect of a particular type of message. The importance that injured parties ascribe to a rectification after a news article that is considered damaging, proves how highly people regard the influence of texts. But the theory does not support this point of view. A psychological theory claims that readers maintain their original opinion (so rectifications would be useless), and research into the manipulability of juries in a court of law points out that the type of information is important too: negative information is more easily ignored than positive information. The plausibility of information also has an effect: providing a plausible explanation increases the effectiveness of a rectification compared to just denying negative information.

The subject of this inquiry is a good example of the way in which the nature of the message is varied to achieve a certain effect, in this case the reader's image of the topic of the message. It is therefore a good example of the rapidly expanding research into attitudinal and behavioral changes in readers on the basis of changes in content.

Ecological validity

What these articles have in common is a focus on the function of texts. Which brings me to the fourth and last trend. In discourse studies it is becoming less and less customary to publish research that only focuses on purely text-based aspects, or on data that can be gathered from behind a desk. More and more attention is being paid to a combination of this type of research with a description of the use of texts in a real-life situation or in an experiment in which the text situation is imitated as faithfully as possible. In the first contribution about joint writing, a case study is presented on the development of a policy document within a public body. The second (about forms of public educa-

tion in the agricultural sector) obtained data from interviews with advisory staff and farmers. In the third contribution, an experiment is discussed in which special attention was paid to the naturalness of manipulations. We have every reason to assume that ecological validity will be a central feature of future publications about texts in use.

The contributions presented here provide a good overview of current research on the discourse studies approach to communication.

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