

Chapter 5 Texts in context

So far we have been looking at texts ‘from the inside out’, as it were. That is, we have been concerned with the way that texts are internally structured and inherently meaningful. We have been looking at specific features of texts and how they relate to other parts of the same text, that is to say, the *co-text*. But texts do not exist in a vacuum. They are written and read, spoken and listened to, by particular people in particular situations and for particular purposes. In other words, they have *contexts*. In this chapter we will look at the way the context influences both the production and the interpretation of texts.

Contexts of use

Take, for example, this sentence:

Just cup your hands together and roll close to the outlet.

On its own, it’s quite difficult – if not impossible – to work out what it means. The use of the imperative forms *cup* and *roll* suggest it might be some kind of command or instruction, but beyond that it’s difficult to know, for example, what *the outlet* refers to. When we add the rest of the text (ie the *co-text*), the meaning starts to become more clearly focused:

5.1

Evaporation is the most hygienic of the practical methods of hand drying. Just cup your hands together and roll close to the outlet.

There are elements of cohesion in the text – notably the repetition of the word *hand/hands*. Moreover, our expectation that sentences are juxtaposed because they are somehow mutually relevant enables us to make sense of the second sentence in terms of the first – for example that it has got something to do with *evaporation*, perhaps. But until we know that the text was originally found on a hand-dryer in a washroom (its *context*) and not, say, in a science textbook, total coherence is still elusive.

Put simply, texts not only connect internally, but they connect with their contexts of use.

The study of language in its contexts of use – and how these contexts impact on the way we produce and interpret texts – is known generally as *pragmatics*. Because the pragmatic meaning of an utterance or text is context sensitive, it is variable, as opposed to its *semantic* meaning, which is more fixed. For example, the semantic meaning of the word *steam* is (according to the dictionary) *the hot vapour formed by boiling water*. What, though, would you make of this instance of the same word in the form I once encountered it?

5.2



I've tried this out on a number of people and they have come up with some original, even ingenious, suggestions, such as that it is the sign leading to the relevant section of a railway museum. If you turn to page 185, you'll see that it is indeed a sign, but a road sign, and it is situated in an area of geothermal activity (Rotorua, New Zealand, to be specific) in order to warn motorists of the possibility of reduced visibility due to steam. Without this contextual information, the text is open to a variety of interpretations.

In fact, it took an anthropologist to realize that, without context knowledge, the meaning of a text is difficult, if not impossible, to unpack. It was Malinowski, working in the early years of the last century in the South Pacific, who first observed that 'An utterance becomes intelligible only when it is placed within its context of situation.'

Of course, very occasionally not even these contextual clues can help. Here is an English text I found on a hot water thermos flask in a hotel room in China (and which I have already mentioned, in Chapter 2):

5.3

*I like a pumpkin.
I like a celery.
Go toward the 21st century.*

With the best will in the world, I cannot get this text to make sense. I can only conclude, therefore, that this is not text at all, but simply decoration, in the same way that random words are sometimes incorporated into fabric design.

On the whole, however, the relation between a text and its context are more transparent. This is partly due to the knowledge we have, as members of a shared culture, as to what texts are likely in what contexts and what the distinguishing characteristics of these texts might be.

Discovery activity 5.1 Contexts of use

Identify the likely context for each of these texts (the first of which you have met already). What clues helped you do the task?

5.4

For the perfect cup, use one tea bag per person and add freshly drawn boiling water. Leave standing for 3–5 minutes before stirring gently. Can be served with or without milk and sugar.

5.5

TEA

Tea is made by pouring boiling water on to tea leaves. The leaves come from tea bushes, which are grown mainly in India, Sri Lanka and China. Tea first came to Europe from China in the 1600s. At first it was brewed and stored in barrels, like beer.

5.6

- S1** Chris, do you want some cream on yours or?
S2 Just a little bit.
S1 It's terrible for your arteries. [inaudible].
S5 Have a cup of tea and wash it down.
S6 So Adam, coffee?
S5 I'll have a coffee as well thanks.

5.7

We followed John into the tiled café. It was set back from the road and was not so far from where our van was now parked.

'It's a French hotel,' John whispered. 'I think it might be a bit expensive.'

'We'll just have some tea,' Mum reassured him and we sat down in the shade of the terrace.

The tea they brought was made from mint leaves and was very, very sweet. Mum looked into the pot. 'It's like syrup in there,' she said.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Even without reading the texts closely, the lay-out alone should have helped you identify the text types (assuming you were familiar with such text types). And it should be obvious that text 5.6 is the transcription of a spoken text, while the others are all written. A closer look at the language of the written texts helps classify them as, respectively, *instructions* (note the imperative verbs, for example), *factual information* (the passive constructions help identify this) and *narrative* (the past tenses and quoted speech are a giveaway). The spoken text (5.6)⁵⁷ seems to be taking place in the context of a meal: note the offers and acceptances.

It doesn't need sophisticated text analysis skills to conclude that both texts 5.6 and 5.7 are probably extracts from longer texts. The pronoun *yours* and the linking expression *as well* in 5.6. seem to refer back to prior information, while, in text 5.7, the writer seems to assume that the reader already knows who *John* and *Mum* are and that *the tiled café* and *our van* have already been mentioned.

A still closer study of the texts enables us to refine our predictions. For example, we can deduce that the instructions in 5.4 were written not simply to give instructions but also to promote a positive feeling towards the product itself. Note the choice of words with positive connotations such as *perfect*, *freshly drawn*, *gently*. This in turn suggests that the text is part of the packaging of the product, rather than, say, an extract from a reference book. (The text does in fact come from the wrapping of a teabag.)

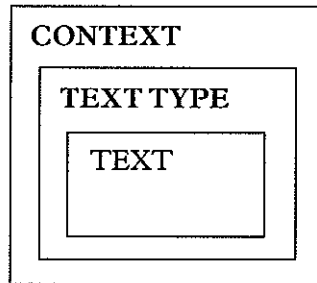
Text 5.5 may have been written with younger readers in mind, since it is relatively simple in terms of the language used and the concepts it conveys. (In fact, it comes from a children's encyclopedia⁵⁸.)

The people in text 5.6 would seem to be on familiar terms, judging by the use of first names and the use of informal expressions such as *just a little bit*, *wash it down*. Also, the comment about *arteries*, which might be considered impertinent in a more formal context (eg tea with the Queen), suggests a jokey familiarity.

And 5.7 might either be a memoir (it's written in the first person (*we, our*) and the writer refers to one of the characters as *Mum*) or fiction, or a combination of the two. (In fact, it comes from a novel⁵⁹.) ■

Context, text type and text

To sum up, the language choices in these texts – such as the use of the imperative, or of the passive, or of narrative tenses, or of informal vocabulary, or of words with positive connotations – seem to reflect the kind of text each one is. And, in turn, the kind of text each one is seems to be a reflection of particular context factors, such as the text's purpose and topic, its audience and its mode (ie whether spoken or written). That is, there is a direct relation between the lower-level choices of grammar and vocabulary – what, for convenience, I will call *text* (uncountable) – and the text type itself. In turn, there is a relation between text, text type and the context in which the text operates. We can illustrate this relation like this:



One immediate implication of this relationship is that, given text, it is possible to make confident predictions about both the text type and the context (as we saw with the example 5.6 above, for instance). Conversely, given sufficient information about the context, we can make accurate predictions about the kinds of texts you would be likely to find there and the textual features of these texts as well.

Discovery activity 5.2 *Predicting text type in context*

What texts would you expect to find in the following contexts? In what ways might these texts be similar or different?

- the noticeboard in the teachers' room of a language school
- inside a bus
- a magazine targeted at teenage girls.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

If your teachers' room is anything like mine, it will contain an assortment of short texts, some of which will be purely administrative and factual (such as schedules, announcements of room changes and of meeting times and topics, lists of stand-by duties, minutes of meetings, etc). There will be others which will have a more regulatory function (appeals to teachers to clean up after eating, to fill in class registers, and so on). Here is one from my own school:

5.8

DO'S and DON'TS**Reception**

- Registers belong in reception except during class-time.
- Don't make any changes in registers – send students to reception.
- Don't put students up or down without seeing Jenny, then send student to reception.
- Phone reception and Jenny before 1pm if you're sick (evening teachers).
- Phone reception as soon as possible if you're sick (morning teachers).
- etc.

And there will also be such ephemera as texts advertising local services, or offering domestic items for sale, or asking for donations of books for a specific charity. There may also be some light-hearted material of only marginal relevance, such as a cartoon clipped from a satirical magazine. And a postcard or two from teachers who are currently on vacation.

The bus, on the other hand, will have a more restricted range of texts and none of them will be as informal as, say, holiday postcards. But, like the teachers' room, there will be a mix of factual material (eg information about routes and fares), advertisements and rules-and-regulations-type texts, although these are likely to be more formally worded than the teachers' room notices. As an example of the degree of formality, the following comes from an intercity bus:

5.9

In the interests of **safety and comfort** if you wish to use this seat you **must** wear the seatbelt provided. In addition, passengers are asked to remain seated until the coach comes to a complete stop at your requested bus stop.

The teen magazine will include a variety of text types, from the factual-informational (*Jane's fashion news*, *Meet the boys*, *I quit school to save the forest*), to the more interpersonal advice-type texts (*Ask anything*, *Quiz: What's the secret of your success?*, *The style council*) plus a lot of advertising. The style, of course, is likely to be less formal even than the teachers' room board. Here, for example, is some teenage advice⁶⁰:

5.10

Rule 1:
Give him
sweet treats.

Sabrina Everyone likes presents, I know I do! Keep love sweet by surprising your boy with prezzies. It doesn't matter what you give – it'll make him feel appreciated and loved. And if your luck's in, you'll get a big thank you snog too!

■

We have seen, then, that given a text (as in examples 5.4 to 5.7), it's possible to work out its context, and given a context, it's possible to predict the kind of text you would find there (as in examples 5.8 to 5.10).

Text functions

Given a context... But what is it about a context that determines the way a text is realized? What are the features of the context that impact on the way that language is used in that context?

Various theories of language and context have been proposed, each identifying the contextual factors that most significantly affect the language choices involved in text production and interpretation. Most theorists agree that a key factor determining the structure and language in a text is its *function*. In fact, Michael Halliday (the father of functional grammar) defined text as 'language that is functional. By functional, we simply mean language that is doing some job in some context, as opposed to isolated words or sentences that I might put on the blackboard.'⁶¹

We saw, for example, that the texts typically found in a teachers' room or in a bus divide more or less into two main categories: those that are *factual-informational* and those that are more like *rules and regulations*. Various systems have been devised to itemize and classify key language functions. Here, for example, is one such list of 'macro-functions', that is, the larger functions under which more specific functions are subsumed:

- 1 **referring** – that is, using language to convey or solicit information
- 2 **expressing feelings** – for example, saying what you like or dislike
- 3 **regulating** – using language to influence people and get things done, such as requesting, ordering, giving or refusing permission, promising, warning, etc
- 4 **interacting** – using language to establish and maintain social relations (also called the social or interpersonal function)
- 5 **playing** – using language imaginatively and playfully.

Discovery activity 5.3 Text functions

Categorize the following texts according to their macro-functions:

5.11

The ladies and gentlemen who smoke are kindly requested to use the ashtrays and to leave them in the corridors. We would also be pleased if they refrain from smoking in the classrooms. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

5.12

**Thank you
for
NOT SMOKING.**

5.13

TOBACCO

Tobacco is made from the dried leaves of the tobacco plant. It originally grew wild in America. The Spaniards brought tobacco to Europe in the 1500s and today tobacco is grown in Asia, Africa and Europe as well as America.

Tobacco leaf can be made into pipe, cigar or cigarette tobacco, or snuff. Smoking is a harmful habit. It is especially bad for the lungs and heart.

5.14

I loved McFly's first single and can't wait for their album to come out. Me and my mates made up a dance to it and it's well funny. I even caught my dad singing along to it on the radio. *Sarah, Glasgow.*

5.15

so	go
go	so
sl	ow
go	oh
low	ow
oh	

5.16

Scott
Thanks for sending me the disk.
Sandy mckay

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Text 5.11 is clearly regulatory. Basically, it's a very elaborate way of saying *You can smoke in the corridors but please don't smoke in the classrooms*. **Text 5.12**, commonly found in taxi cabs, is of course also regulatory, but adopts a slightly more subtle approach than 5.11. In fact it disguises the regulatory function using a form that is more often associated with the interpersonal function of *thanking*. That is, the literal (or semantic) meaning and the pragmatic meaning don't necessarily match. As noted above, pragmatics is the study of how we 'read between the lines' of texts like this. The reason that text 5.11 is so elaborate and 5.12 so indirect is that, of all the language functions, the regulatory one is the most sensitive. Telling people what to do or not to do carries certain risks – what are called threats to *face*. In order to reduce this potential threat, we are often compelled to resort to linguistically quite complex evasion strategies.

By contrast, text 5.13 (which comes from the same source as text 5.5, incidentally,) is basically referential, in that it conveys factual information. Of course, it could be argued that there is an implicit message in the final two sentences that has a more regulatory intention, such as *to warn*. It's significant, for example, that the message SMOKING CAUSES HEART DISEASE (on a cigarette packet) is called a *health warning* rather than, say, a *medical report*. This is another instance of how context affects our interpretation of a text's purpose.

Text 5.14 (from a magazine for teens) expresses the writer's feelings about a pop group, so has an expressive function. Text 5.15 is a poem¹², part of a longer sequence, and simply plays with words that have the 'oh' sound – the form of the words taking precedence, temporarily, over their meaning. Hence its function is mainly playful.

Text 5.16, because it is simply the polite acknowledgement of something that someone has done, is essentially interpersonal. In fact, apart from the implication that the disk has arrived, there is very little informational content at all in this text. However, it fulfils an important social function, as do other 'content-less' expressions like *Hi! How are you?*, *Have a nice day!*, etc. Such 'polite noises' are said to have a *phatic* function. (This does not mean, though, that all expressions of *thanks* are purely phatic: see text 5.12 as a case in point.)

Pragmatics also explains how we read text 5.1 (the instructions on the hand-dryer) as regulatory (telling us how to do something) rather than purely referential, as it might initially appear on the basis of the first sentence. When there is a mismatch between the surface form of a text and its context we are compelled to look for alternative 'readings'. As we have seen, these alternative readings often have a regulatory function – what on the surface looks like a statement of fact is actually trying to get us to do something. Take the health warning on the cigarette packet, for example.

One implication of the fact that texts don't always mean what they say they mean is a legal one. A great deal of litigation is expended on interpreting the intentions of writers or speakers. You only have to think of President Clinton's legalistic squirming when asked if his claim that 'there is no improper relationship' with Monica Lewinsky was true:

'It depends upon what the meaning of the word 'is' is... If the... If he... If 'is' means 'is and never has been', that is not an... that's one thing. If it means 'there is none', that was a completely true statement.'

Nearer to home, a colleague of mine once sent a joke postcard to his Director of Studies claiming he was having such a wonderful time on holiday that he'd decided not to come back for the next school term. Not being a student of pragmatics, perhaps, the Director of Studies took it literally and he came back to find he had been replaced! This shows how it is not just individual words or phrases, but whole texts, that can be misconstrued. ■

Context and register

We have seen how the purpose of a text affects its production, although not in ways that are always completely transparent. What other contextual factors determine the choices of language we make when we create a text? And can we relate these factors directly to specific formal features of the text?

Of all the possible components of the context that might impact on the language choices in text production, just three seem to be particularly significant:

- the *what* of the situation – what kind of social activity is going on, and about what sort of topic (what is called the *field*)
- the *who* of the situation – the participants, their relationship and so on (what is called the *tenor*)
- the *how* of the situation – the means by which the text is being created, eg e-mail, fact-to-face talk, broadcast talk, written monologue and so on (what is called the *mode*).

These three contextual dimensions – field, tenor and mode – determine what is called the *register* of the resulting text. That is to say, different configurations of these dimensions demand different kinds of choices at the level of grammar and vocabulary, and these choices create textual effects that we recognize as being appropriate to the context of the text's use. Thus, the register of a teenage magazine allows for such words as *prezzie* and *snog* that would be inappropriate in a children's encyclopedia or in academic correspondence, for example. By the same token, you would not expect expressions like *ladies and gentlemen...*, *are kindly requested to...*, *we would also be pleased if...*, on a teabag wrapper.

Let's look at an example of register at work. I once sent an article to a prestigious academic journal and was pleased to get the following e-mailed response from the journal's editor:

5.17

Dear Professor Thornbury,
It appears that we will be including your Forum commentary in the spring issue. I would greatly appreciate it if you could send a disk copy of your response for production purposes to my office at San Francisco State University. Please label the disk with the word processing program you are using.
Thank you in advance,
Sandra McKay

The *field* in which the text is situated is very generally academic publishing and accounts for the presence of words such as *spring issue*, *disk copy*, *production purposes*, *word processing program*.

The *tenor* is very formal, even frozen, influenced by the fact that neither of the participants have met, nor know much about each other's status. By addressing me as Professor Thornbury, the writer avoids causing any offence, in case I am indeed a professor (which I am not). The use of highly indirect and modalized language (ie language using modal verbs such as *would*, *could*) is another way of creating a safe distance.

The *mode* is e-mail communication, usually a rather informal medium, but the writer uses the conventions of a formal letter, again, just to be on the safe side.

In my reply, while the field and mode remain the same, I seem to deliberately have adjusted the tenor, opting for a less formal wording, but still maintaining some of the conventions of a formal letter, eg in the address form and the closing:

5.18

Dear Sandra McKay,
I sent the disk off today. I hope it opens OK – let me know if there is any problem.
Thanking you for your interest,
Scott Thornbury

The response is quite startling in the degree to which the writer has picked up on the adjustment to the tenor:

5.19

Scott,
Thanks for sendingme the disk.
Sandy mckay

The text is much more in keeping with the informality of e-mail communication (including uncorrected errors of punctuation). But, of course, it would not have been appropriate to have initiated the exchange in this style. Nor could the adjustment to tenor have occurred had the writer not been sensitive to the signs I sent out in text 5.18. This is a good example of how register is both jointly

negotiated and in a constant state of flux. Needless to say, this can present enormous difficulties to writers – such as learners of English – who are not familiar with the conventions, or cannot easily recognize the subtle indicators of register adjustment.

Discovery activity 5.4 *Field, tenor and mode*

Identify the field, tenor and mode of each of these texts and, on that basis, the possible context in which the text was situated.

5.20

**This door is alarmed.
Emergency use only.**

5.21

Hi. R u back yet? How was
it? C u l8r? S.

5.22

*I, Henry, take you, Joylene,
to be my wedded wife,
to have and to hold
from this day forward;
for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish,
till death us do part.*

Commentary ■ ■ ■

For text 5.20 the field is something like ‘public notices of prohibition relating specifically to doors’; the tenor is distant, impersonal, officialese. The use of the passive voice in the first sentence is a convenient way of deleting any mention of writer or reader from the message. This is also characteristic of the mode, which is written. Notice, too, that expressions like ‘this door is alarmed’ would be very unlikely to occur in spoken language (or, if they did, might be rather ambiguous). The text in fact was a notice on a door in a hotel. Notice how words like *this* in texts (as in *this door*) often work as linguistic ‘guy ropes’, tying the text to its context of situation.

As brief as it is, the field of text 5.21 combines greetings and travel; the tenor is informal (*hi, c u l8r* (= *see you later*)), suggesting a degree of intimacy; and the mode is written, or rather, electronic, since this is of course a text message. The conventions of text messaging, such as the use of abbreviations and ellipsis (leaving words out), are not simply a question of tenor (although most text messages are sent between friends), but are due to the constraints of the medium. Because text messaging is a kind of interaction that *almost* happens synchronously – that is in real time – it has to be done quickly. Like on-line chat, it is really more like speech than conventional writing. At the same time texting is relatively awkward, compared to, say, typing on a computer keyboard, and the length of text is severely curtailed. These mode effects mean that certain time-saving conventions quickly became established, which, combined with the informal tenor, have resulted in a distinctive unique configuration of register variables. As a further example, here is the reply I received to text 5.21:

5.23

Just got back. In taxi frm airport. Have copies of book. Lets meet up this week. B.

Text 5.22, which is, of course, the wedding vow, is a highly ritualized promise. The field is matrimony; the tenor – despite the fact that the participants know each other – is very formal, as befits the solemn and very public occasion. The mode is spoken, or, better, recitation, since it involves the speaking of a written text. Hence the text has the characteristics of written language, rather than spoken, and includes archaic and very literary language like ‘till death us do part’. Both this text and the text message (text 5.21) demonstrate that some forms of written language are actually more like spoken language and vice versa. This in turn demonstrates the powerful influence of context on language in use. ■

Genres

We have seen how the context variables of field, tenor and mode interact to determine the register of the text, realized in choices at the level of words and grammar. Through repeated use, certain register combinations become institutionalized and are called *genres*. The term *genre* originally came from literary studies, but its meaning has been extended to mean any frequently occurring, culturally-embedded, social process which involves language. Take formal letters, for instance. If you look back at text 5.17, you’ll see how the conventions of the formal letter genre have been replicated in an e-mail. These conventions are quickly abandoned in subsequent messages (texts 5.18 and 5.19) – due to the fact that the mode (e-mail) allows a great deal more informality than traditional ‘snail mail’ type correspondence. In fact, e-mail messages are an interesting example of a relatively recent genre – one for which it was necessary to draw up some rules very quickly, in order to minimize the danger of causing offence due to ‘genre unfamiliarity’.

Many websites, even whole books, are devoted to advising e-mail writers as to the correct ‘netiquette’. Typical advice includes:

- Don’t WRITE IN CAPITAL LETTERS. It comes across as LOUD and OVER-ASSERTIVE.
- For the same reason, don’t over-use exclamation marks!!!!
- Don’t leave the Subject field blank. A subject helps your correspondents both to interpret your message and to store and retrieve it easily.
- Always start your message with a greeting, even if it’s simply Hi!
- Keep to the subject. If you have to cover a number of different topics, it may be better to send separate e-mails.
- Always sepll-chcek your e-mail. And use correct grammar: if you doesn’t, you come across as sloppy and even disrespectful. The fact that e-mails are quick and easy does not excuse slovenly use of language.

What is interesting here is that this advice – especially the last point – is rather *prescriptive*, and is not always followed, as, for example in text 5.19 above. In fact, one of the criticisms of a genre-based approach to teaching writing is that it is unnecessarily prescriptive, a point that I will return to when we look at classroom applications of genre.

Another instance of a genre that is, literally, inscribed in stone is the graveyard headstone epitaph. A few years ago a controversy erupted in Britain as to whether the words *dad* and *grandad* were appropriate for a headstone. The message a family wanted to inscribe was: *In loving memory of Frederick Martin Brown who died on 28th December 1992. A devoted, much loved husband, dad and grandad.* The vicar refused; the case went to court and the judge ruled in favour of the vicar, citing the Churchyards Handbook, which says, ‘An epitaph is a public document and not a cosy one at that. Nicknames or pet names, Mum, Dad, Ginger, inscribed in stone would carry overtones of the dog cemetery.’ This is a good, if slightly bizarre, example of how certain text types become institutionalised, and it also demonstrates how genres are not arbitrary but reflect the social and cultural processes that generate them.

Discovery activity 5.5 Genre

Genre analysis attempts to describe both the shared macro-structure of a genre, as well as the lower-level features (eg of grammar and vocabulary) that texts belonging to the genre have in common. One way of doing this is to compare related texts. Here are three texts (two of which you are already familiar with) which all come from a children’s encyclopedia⁶². What features – both macro and micro – do they have in common, and how might these relate to the purpose and intended audience of the texts?

5.24

TEA

Tea is made by pouring boiling water on to tea leaves. The leaves come from tea bushes, which are grown mainly in India, Sri Lanka and China. Tea first came to Europe from China in the 1600s. At first it was brewed and stored in barrels, like beer.

5.25

TOBACCO

Tobacco is made from the dried leaves of the tobacco plant. It originally grew wild in America. The Spaniards brought tobacco to Europe in the 1500s and today tobacco is grown in Asia, Africa and Europe as well as America. Tobacco leaf can be made into pipe, cigar or cigarette tobacco, or snuff. Smoking is a harmful habit. It is especially bad for the lungs and heart.

5.26

SILK

The beautiful smooth cloth called silk is made from threads spun by the silkworm. This is actually the caterpillar of a moth. When the caterpillar is fully grown, it wraps itself in a cocoon of fine silk, stuck together with gum. The ancient Chinese were the first to discover how to wash away the gum and unwind the silk on to reels. It was then dyed and woven into cloth.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Very generally, there seems to be a pattern across all three texts that moves from the general to the more particular. That is, there is a general definition-like statement, which is followed by more detailed information on cultivation, production and history. In the case of *Tea* and *Silk* the cultivation information precedes the historical information. In the case of *Tobacco*, this order is reversed. Only in the case of *Tobacco* is there a separate evaluative comment; in *Silk* the evaluation (*beautiful smooth*) is incorporated into the opening definition. In *Tea* there is no evaluation.

On the basis of this (admittedly slender) evidence we could claim that the generic structure of this kind of text includes the obligatory elements: 1 *definition*, 2 *cultivation*, 3 *historical background* and 4 *production processes*, but that the order of elements 2 and 3 are reversible. There is an optional element, either separate or interspersed: 5 *evaluation*.

A closer look at these elements reveals commonalities in terms of the language that is used to realize them. The definition statement, for example, starts with a noun phrase which repeats or elaborates the title of the entry: *Tea...*, *Tobacco...*, *The beautiful smooth cloth called silk...* This is followed by the passive verb phrase *is made*, followed either by *from* + noun phrase (*from threads*), or *by* + present participle (*by pouring*). Agent-less passive structures recur in other parts of each text: *it was brewed*, *tobacco is grown*, *it was then dyed*. In two of the texts the historical information is credited to human agents: *The Spaniards...*, *The ancient Chinese...* Unsurprisingly, the historical information marks a shift into the past tense. All the verb forms in the text are affirmative (ie not negative) and declarative (ie not interrogative) and all (barring one: *Tobacco leaf can be made into...*) are non-modalized. In other words, the information is asserted as factual, certain and uncontroversial.

From a syntactic point of view, the text is relatively simple. Over the three sample texts there are nineteen finite verbs in a total of fifteen sentences, suggesting that there are not many subordinate clauses. The average length of the sentences is twelve words (compared to fifteen for the first paragraph of this chapter, for instance). Nevertheless, the texts are quite dense: apart from the title words (*tea*, *tobacco*, *silk*) there is not a lot of repetition of words, a number of the words are relatively uncommon and the proportion of content words (like *beer*, *Spaniards*, *caterpillar*) to grammar words (like *of*, *is*, *as*) is high. Theoretically, this should make the texts quite heavy-going. On the other hand, the texts are short and tightly cohesive: anaphoric (back) reference is frequent, in the form of *it*, for example. ■

There are a lot of other factors that would be of interest to genre analysts, such as the relative frequency and distribution of transitive and intransitive verbs, and the

number and complexity of the noun phrases, including the frequency of proper nouns and dates. In fact, one of the dangers of a genre-analytic approach is that there is no end to what is analysable and teaching genre can sometimes become all analysis and no synthesis. The analysis should not be pursued at the expense of allowing learners opportunities to apply this analysis in the production of their own texts.

What is important is that all these factors can be related to the kind of context in which the genre will be used. The audience (children) requires a level of transparency that is reflected in the brevity and syntactic simplicity of the texts, although this is counterbalanced by the lexical density – the result of having to pack quite a lot of information into a short space. The didactic function accounts for the assertive and unproblematic way that the information is presented and also accounts for the one or two instances of explicit evaluation. And the absence of human agents (apart from the historical Spaniards and Chinese) may even suggest an ideological stance, since no mention is made of the people (possibly lowly paid and exploited) who are currently involved in the cultivation and production of these products. Such hidden ‘sub-texts’ are particularly susceptible to the kind of analysis advocated by proponents of a genre-based view of text.

What, then, is the difference between a *text type* and a *genre*? Many writers use these terms interchangeably, or avoid the term *genre* altogether, preferring to reserve it for the description of literary texts. For others, the term *genre* is intimately associated with Halliday’s *systemic functional linguistics*, which attempts to describe language in terms of its social purposes. Thus, genre analysis doesn’t simply describe how texts are structured, but tries to account for these structures in terms of the social and cultural forces that shaped them. It is not simply descriptive (as in text linguistics) or even interpretative (as in literary criticism), but *explanatory*. A text, such as a headstone, a text message, or an encyclopedia entry, takes the form it does, not through accident, but because its construction reflects its social purpose, specifically its particular configuration of the variables of field, tenor and mode.

Classroom applications

The interdependent relationship between texts and their contexts has significant implications for language teaching and these can perhaps best be summed up by paraphrasing Malinowski:

A text becomes intelligible only when it is placed within its context of situation.

This maxim applies equally to the *understanding* and to the *production* of texts. Let’s look at understanding first.

A lot of teaching texts, such as those that learners read or listen to in the classroom or in examinations, are de-contextualized. That is, there are few or no clues as to where the text originated. This is particularly the case with recorded audio material, where learners hear only the disembodied voices of complete strangers. Typically, learners are asked to read or listen to such texts and then to answer comprehension questions about them. These questions often focus on specific details in the text, overlooking the fact that, until the learners have an idea of where the text originally came from – its context of situation – such details might be unintelligible. This is because, as has been argued in this chapter, the context of situation, including the text’s original purpose and audience, determines the way the text is constructed. Without context knowledge, learners may feel a bit

like the writer V. S. Naipaul from Trinidad, who, on his first trip to the United States, attempted to make sense of *The New York Times*:

'I was interested in newspapers and knew this paper to be one of the foremost in the world. But to read a newspaper for the first time is like coming into a film that has been on for an hour. [...] It made me feel a stranger, that paper. But on the front page, at the bottom, there was a story to which I could respond, because it dealt with an experience I was sharing. The story was about the weather. Apparently it was unseasonably cool and gray for the end of July, so unseasonable that it was worth a story.'⁶³

Nowadays, coursebooks are much better than they used to be at situating the texts they use. The fact that many classroom texts are authentic – or appear authentic – helps learners to make accurate guesses as to the type of text they are – whether, for example, they are news articles or advertisements or informal letters. The problem is more acute when texts have been 'wrenched' from their context, re-typed, possibly simplified and re-presented to learners without any visual clues as to their origin: foundling texts, in fact. (We will return to the issue of authenticity in the next chapter.)

One of two 'context-flagging' strategies is therefore recommended when using texts in the classroom:

- situate the text firmly in its context before learners read or listen to it
- ask learners to guess the context after an initial exposure.

The first strategy might involve nothing more than saying, 'You are going to read a text that comes from the problem page of a teenagers' magazine.' Or 'You are going to listen to a conversation that takes place at the information desk of an airport.' This may be all learners need in order to activate their *schemas*, ie their mental representations of how things happen, specifically where language is involved (see page 55).

The second strategy might involve them reading the first few lines, or skimming the text quickly, in order to answer the question: *Who wrote the text, what about, to whom and why?* If the text is a recorded one, the learners can be asked to listen to the first few utterances and answer the question: *Who is talking to whom, about what and why?* Having established the context, a follow-up question might be: *And what do you think is going to happen?* The idea is to activate the learners' predictive skills. By testing their predictions against the evidence of the text as it unfolds, they become more active and involved readers and listeners.

Discovery activity 5.6 *Activating schemata*

Try it yourself with this text – part of an authentic conversation between two women⁶⁴. Cover the text with a piece of paper. Reveal one chunk of text at a time, and each time ask yourself: *What are they talking about? Why? Who is going to say what next?* Then check to see how accurate your predictions were:

- S1** I didn't get one with roots this year
- S1** I'm ever so pleased with it
but I did my usual <LAUGHS>
- S2** what?

- S1** I went out Thursday
I went down to Carpenter's Nurseries
cos you know I got my trees from there
- S2** yeah
- S1** and he'd got lots of rooted ones
and I thought 'No,
I'm not gonna bother with roots this year',
cos it's always a pain to me,
I never – never takes in the garden.
I thought 'Sod it,
I'm not gonna have any worries'
- S2** yeah
- S1** so
- I bought a beautiful tree,
fiver,
beautiful tree
- S2** mhm
- S1** when I got home it was too big to go in the house
<SPLUTTER OF LAUGHTER>
- S1** and that's the third year running I've done that,
I thought, 'He'll kill me,'
I thought, 'No he won't,
I'll see to it myself.'
Here's me six weeks out of hospital
- I'm sawing away at this tree.
- But five pounds for a nine foot tree
- S2** Incredible
- S1** and it is the most beautiful shape

Commentary ■ ■ ■

If you still haven't worked out what they are talking about, you probably feel like many learners do, trying to make sense of texts in the absence of sufficient contextual information. In this case, there is cultural context to take into account as well, since the women are talking about *Christmas trees*. Learners unfamiliar with the pre-Christmas custom of buying a tree, with or without roots, would have considerable difficulty with the text, even if they had been told what the word *one* (in the first line) referred to. Nevertheless, the technique of alternating the gradual disclosure of a text with discussion as to what is going on is a useful one. It is easier to manage, of course, with recorded texts, but a written text can also be revealed gradually using either an overhead or a data projector. ■

Text production

As with receptive skills work, many classroom writing tasks are de-contextualized, of the type:

Write 250 words about your favourite pop group.

or

You have just won \$10,000. What will you do with the money? (10 sentences)

or

Discuss the pros and cons of examinations. (One page)

or

A day in the country. (You have 30 minutes.)

In the absence of any context – including a purpose, an audience and details about the mode, such as whether it is a letter, a magazine article and so on – it is not surprising that learners often produce texts of startling banality. In the absence of a real-life purpose, the task is likely to be interpreted as involving nothing more than the display of accurate grammar.

Discovery activity 5.7 Contextualizing writing tasks

Choose one or two of the writing tasks above and think of ways that you could contextualize them, in order to make explicit their function, field, tenor and mode.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Some possible ways of adapting these tasks might include:

Your favourite band are playing in your town soon. Write an email (250 words) to a friend, who doesn't know or doesn't like the band, and try to persuade the friend to come with you to hear them.

Or

You've been asked to write some cover notes for your favourite group's latest album. Write two or three paragraphs, explaining why you like them so much.

For the second task:

You've just won \$10,000. You are going to be interviewed by a local newspaper. What questions do you think they will ask you? Prepare your answers.

For the third:

Your school is considering dropping examinations from the curriculum, but is asking for everyone's opinion. Write to your school board, outlining the arguments for and against keeping the exams and stating your own opinion.

And finally:

A travel magazine is offering free flights for the best account of a day spent out of town, which they will publish in their section called 'A day in the country'.

You may feel that these tasks are a little bit contrived and that they are therefore no better a safeguard against banality than the originals. Of course, the best tasks are those that are motivated by the learners' own need to communicate their individual interests, wishes, concerns and so on. Establishing a regular channel for doing this may obviate the need to contrive artificial writing tasks of the above type. One way of contextualizing writing in this way is to ask learners to write letters to you regularly and to reply to them in kind. While this may seem time-consuming, it is probably no more so than the reading and marking of traditional written homework, especially if both teacher and learners have access to e-mail. And, of course, the content is bound to be more interesting than that generated by more traditional writing tasks. ■

Using a genre-based approach

Finally, what does a *genre-based approach* have to offer for text production, both spoken and written? Typically such an approach begins not with a creative task but with the analysis of representative examples of a text genre, in much the same way that we analysed the entries in the children's encyclopedia. This analysis will focus on:

- the macrostructures of the text – how, for example, it is organized into obligatory and optional elements and how these are ordered
- the *texture* of the text, that is, the way that the text is made cohesive through, for example, the use of linking devices
- the lower-level features of grammar and vocabulary that encode the register of the text, that is, its field, tenor and mode.

A genre-based approach is particularly well-suited for text types that are both fairly formulaic and whose mastery confers social advantages on the user. For example, the ability to write a convincing CV, along with an accompanying letter, would be an asset for an immigrant looking for a job. Both the CV and the letter are fairly formulaic and their generic features can be highlighted through the study of representative examples. This utilitarian motivation partly accounts for the popularity of a genre-based approach in Australia, with its large immigrant population.

In theory, however, a genre-based approach is aimed at more than simply the ability to reproduce formulaic text types. By relating texts to their contexts, including their social purposes and by raising awareness as to the meaning-making potential of register features, genre teachers hope to *empower* their learners – to give them access to the means of text production that are valued in the target culture. This worthy objective may be jeopardized if the analysis becomes too academic. As noted above, there is a real danger of genre analysis becoming overly pre-occupied with the minutiae of textual features, when what learners probably need most is to 'have a go'. The 'have a go' approach, now known as *process writing*, is decried by proponents of genre-based approaches, however. They associate it with uncontrolled self-expression and the perpetuation of mediocrity.

In the next chapter we will look at ways whereby these two positions might be accommodated.

Meanwhile, a 'light' form of genre-based teaching might include the following elements:

- Learners read a text chosen to represent features of a particular genre and their understanding of the text is checked, using standard approaches, eg checking of understanding of the overall gist first, followed by more detailed questions.
- At this point it is important to establish the *function* of the text, its intended audience and its role in the target culture.
- They then look at more examples of the text type. For this reason, it helps if the examples are not too long: short texts are best for genre analysis. If this is not possible – for example, in the case of academic assignments – the focus can be on selected parts of the text, eg the abstract, the introduction, or the bibliography.
- Learners compare the texts and identify generic features, first of the overall structure, including the obligatory and optional elements and then in the use of language within these structures. It is best if learners do the analysis themselves, working in pairs or groups, with teacher guidance, as the features they identify themselves are likely to be more memorable than features that are simply pointed out to them.
- An alternative approach might be to contrast the text with a text that shares some generic features but is significantly different in one or more respects. For example, a formal letter on a specific topic can be contrasted with an informal one on the same topic. In other words, the field and mode remain constant, while the tenor changes. In this analysis stage it is important that the features that are identified as generic are significantly so and that the analysis doesn't get bogged down in detail.
- Learners then attempt to reproduce the genre in a text of their own. Or they can 'play' with the genre, formalizing a text that is informal (a change in tenor), for example, or turning a spoken text into a written one (a change in mode). Or they use their knowledge of the genre to write a parody: this usually involves a change in field. Writing a children's encyclopedia text on the topic of, say, garden gnomes or chewing gum would be an invitation to parody the genre.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at the relation between texts and their contexts of use. Key context variables include the *field*, *tenor* and *mode* of the situational context, that is, the *what*, *who* and *how* of the language event. The way that these variables combine and interact determines the *register* of the text. Certain recurring register combinations become institutionalized over time and are known as *genres*. Genre theory argues that language is best learned through the analysis and mastery of specific genres, since such an approach best reflects the way language is shaped by – and shapes – its social contexts of use. Moreover, mastery of the genres that are valued by a specific community offers the learner access to that community. Critics of genre-based approaches query both its ideological stance and the emphasis on analysis that is often associated with the study of genres and they remind us that learners need not only to analyse language, but to put it to use. Nevertheless, any approach that highlights the relation between a text and its context, so long as it doesn't get bogged down in terminology, should serve to raise learners' awareness about the way texts are produced and interpreted.

One context of use that hasn't been mentioned is the classroom context. Is there a genre that is specific to classrooms? What are its functions and features? That is the subject of the next chapter.