Do we need more of the same?

Some reflections on text analytical research

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For several decades a far greater number of researchers in functional linguistics have been working in the field of text (and discourse, if one wants to make the distinction) analysis than have focused on a grammatical or a phonological phenomenon. At least this is the impression I got from the submitted articles that came to my attention as a former journal editor (see also Asp this volume).[1] The preoccupation with text analytical research is even more evident from conference papers and above all from topics students choose for their dissertations. Apart from the fact that texts may to many seem more fascinating than syntactic constructions or phonological contrasts, an additional explanation is no doubt to be found in the endless supply of new texts which can be analysed with available and well-tried analytical tools. In other words: old methods are easily applied to new texts. This leads to a proliferation of research which may – if carried out skilfully – yield information on specific texts. No matter how competent the analysis, however, one may wonder whether such information is valuable per se. In what follows I aim to answer two questions. The first is general: what functions should text analysis serve? The second is more specific: what are the pitfalls text analysis must avoid? I shall illustrate the second question with an example from my own recent research.

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1. Asp (this volume) counted 67 articles and 46 reviews in *Functions of Language* which had 'text' or 'discourse' in the title, the abstract or keywords. This figure obviously concerns only the published papers, not all the submitted ones. In addition, there are several journals which – unlike *Functions of Language* – only accept contributions on text/discourse.

What functions should text analysis serve?

Although linguists have their very different aims for studying texts, it seems to me that there is one major ultimate goal, which is to gain more insight into the system of language.[2] Within systemic-functional linguistics (SFL) text has always occupied a central place, to the extent that Halliday (1971, as quoted in Webster 2002: 89) has claimed: "I do not think there is any antithesis between the 'textual' and the 'theoretical' in the study of language".

To Halliday, there can be no grammar without text and no text analysis without grammar. In fact, language is structured the way it is because of the functions it serves as text in context. It follows that text analysis is to lay bare in what ways the system of grammar is exploited to create meaning in context. By doing this, the analysis should provide insight into the very nature and the raison d'être of the system. A clear example is Halliday's (1971) own analysis of one literary text, William Golding's *The Inheritors*. In the case of a literary text the intrinsic value of the text itself provides a rationale for its study as the analysis may help to explain the effect the text has on the reader (cf. Wegener this volume on the text as artefact). In this article, Halliday shows how the world view of Neanderthal man, his limited understanding and inability to control the world, is reflected in the transitivity and ergativity choices in the description (cf. also Asp and Davies this volume). Through a comparison of three passages the article demonstrates how Golding uses the verb system to convey a picture of the evolution of man. The broadening of man's horizon, in particular the extent to which he sees himself as capable of having an impact on the world, is expressed in the grammar of his language at different stages. In the language and conception of Neanderthal man people do not act on things, they move only themselves, not other objects. In the world view of "the inheritors", on the other hand, we recognize ours. As Halliday (1971:120) formulates it: "[i]n The Inheritors, the syntax is part of the story". In addition, the analysis enhances our knowledge of the system of language through highlighting the link between grammar, culture and cognition. In other words, it provides evidence for a functional theory of language.

Other texts are worth analysing as instantiations of discourse types. Historical discourse, scientific discourse, mediated political discourse are examples of such types. By studying how the genres are structured, which grammatical choices are typically made, we learn more about the way language operates in

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2. Davies (this volume) makes a very pertinent distinction between analyses which test the theory and those which test the adequacy of descriptions. I use the term 'system of language' to refer both to a theory of how language works and to the description of the system of specific languages. Text analysis may contribute to either.

context to serve specific purposes. For example, studies of scientific writing have revealed how the grammar has created a scientific world of abstraction without the presence of participants, leading to a general "uncommonsense construal" (Thompson 2003: 275). Again, then, the text analysis explains how the needs of the language users shape the system and skew the probabilities. Moreover, the focus in SFL on scientific texts has had an educational goal from the start: to uncover how the discourse of the scientific community is recontextualised in the classroom and affects literacy development. This is a social goal, for which text analysis is applied to resolve inequality. SFL has always had a strong commitment to socially accountable research, and by laying bare the link between the language system and how it operates in genres text analysis may help to solve social inequalities (see e.g. Halliday & Martin 1993; Martin & Veel 1998). Such social concerns in their turn provide feedback to the theory: the more we know about the link between language and power, the better we understand the system.

Textual material is now available in large quantities in electronic corpora and it is obvious that functional theories which aim to provide accounts of language as communication must take advantage of the possibilities offered by such corpora. I am using the term 'corpus' here as defined by Butler (2004b: 150), i.e. the sense in which 'corpus linguists' use it and in which it "differs fundamentally from a collection or an archive of textual material" (Butler 2004b: 151). Modern corpora are large and it is necessary to search them using automated tools. Butler (2004b) is an excellent discussion of the challenges posed to functional theories – by corpora and in particular by corpus-driven research. As predicted by Sinclair (1992) in his programmatic article 'Trust the Text', such research has for example shown up unexpected patterns, collocations and semantic prosodies to such an extent that it has led to the need to rethink the norms and principles of language use. Stubbs (1995) and Butler (2004a) are examples. Now, what we are talking about in such cases is the use of textual material as a source of evidence for theory-building. For these purposes, the structure of whole texts is irrelevant. To what extent then can corpus research contribute to our knowledge of texts? There are undoubtedly still limitations to what we can search for with even the most sophisticated software. Nevertheless, interesting findings have emerged about features characterizing certain registers and discourse types. I am thinking of such work as reported on in Biber (1988). But as Butler (2004b) points out, "many phenomena of interest to the functional linguist are still outside the scope of the computational techniques implemented in the available software", and he mentions in particular phenomena of information distribution. I will come back to the usefulness of corpora for functional text linguistics below.

What are the pitfalls text analysis must avoid?

The above argumentation suggests that when text analysis does not add to our knowledge of the system it fails in one major respect. Let us consider this point by means of two different types of examples. The first is a hypothetical study of essays written by a random group of students. An informed analysis using the tools offered in the literature on genres and scientific writing will lay bare the difficulties (some) students have and thus help the teacher remediate the problem. Text analysis is in this case clearly of tremendous social value. But I would argue that unless such analysis reveals new ways to go, allows for new hypotheses or questions assumptions about the system its importance is restricted to the context of the classroom. Applications of theories and methodologies to new data of the same kind should – if they are to be of interest to the wider linguistic community – generate information which transcends the very specific situation in which the data are gathered. To put it bluntly, yet another thematic development analysis of a text may be a useful exercise to test a student's grasp of the theory and methodology but if it does not open up new perspectives it does not meet the ultimate goal of text linguistics.

This is not to deny the value of applied linguistics, nor of the importance of using academic knowledge to solve 'real-world' problems. Asp (this volume) refers to extra-textual goals of text/discourse analysis such as for instance in forensic applications or clinical uses. She emphasises, though, that such uses "impose the most robust constraints for replicability and reliability of analyses". Indeed, Margaret Berry (2014: 2) calls herself proudly an "applied linguist", whose primary concern is teaching: "Always in my linguistics I hope to say something that will be helpful to teachers". And this admirable preoccupation with what she refers to as "appliable linguistics" is pervasive in the whole of her work. But I at least interpret her as saying that application and theory are inseparable in that the former is not only informed by the latter but that the latter is also informed by applications. Berry is convinced that applied linguists may well "come up with new things" that had so far not been taken into account in the theory. Berry's own work is an excellent example of how applied text linguistics leads to new insights relevant to the theory of the communicating mind.

Another caveat is the following. It is generally known and accepted as self-evident in other sub-disciplines of linguistics that care must be taken not to attribute specific findings too readily to specific causes without taking due account of all possible variables. For example, in sociolinguistics it is common knowledge that if one is interested in the relationship between changing speech patterns and social class one must be cautious not to ignore other variables which may influence the data such as age group and social networks (see Labov 1981 for an early warning to start from the right data and to be careful in drawing conclusions about causes and results).

The same difficulties arise in text analysis. One difficulty lies in comparing one's data with those of other studies. Before drawing conclusions about similarities and differences one must be sure that the text types are comparable, and if not totally comparable, in which dimensions they differ. Another danger resides in linking particular textual features too readily to particular contextual variables. For example, if one chooses to look for interpersonal meaning patterns in a specific discourse type (e.g. parliamentary speeches) there is the risk of overlooking the possibility that the same patterns occur in other text types because they are linked to variables which those types share. These other texts may be other types of public speeches, other types of political texts or even other types of argumentative discourse. The focus on one specific text or even text type (represented by a collection of texts) thus runs not only the usual risk of over-generalisation but also – equally frequently – of under-generalisation. While there is in such cases nothing inherently wrong with the findings about the patterns encountered, a mistaken conclusion is then drawn about the contextual variable responsible for the patterns.

I shall illustrate this 'trap' with an example from my own writings on political interviews. In studies comparing 'mainstream' political interviewees' responses to questions with the responses given by speakers on the extreme right of the political spectrum (Simon-Vandenbergen 2008; Bull & Simon-Vandenbergen 2014) we found that equivocation (in the sense of Bavelas *et al.* 1990) takes the form of 'doublespeak' in the discourse of both the Belgian and British extreme right politicians under scrutiny. This doublespeak was explained as sending two opposing messages at the same time, one explicit and one implicit, and it was attributed to the respective parties' illegal racist positions which they could not openly defend, yet needed to reconfirm in order to keep in touch with their voters. The articles report on case studies of right-wing discourse which showed such strategies to be typical of the context of situation the parties were in at the time of the interviews. This was confirmed by a later study of an interview with an extreme left-wing politician in South-Africa, who found himself in a similar situation of illegal discourse (Bull & Simon-Vandenbergen in press). It was found that the same kind of doublespeak was used, for the same reasons. By comparing data which are similar in some variables but differ in others it becomes possible to disentangle what choices are linked to what contextual variables. In our case the political ideology of the speaker (whether he was right- or leftwing) appeared not to be the determining factor. Doublespeak – as we understand it now in political discourse – is not an exclusive feature of the extreme right nor the extreme left, but generated by the pressures on speakers in the context of political interviews, partly generic and partly arising from the specific situation.

It is clear that comparison is an essential feature of text analysis. Berry (2014: 15) makes this point explicitly: "the text analysis must be comparative text analysis if it is to provide evidence". And she argues further that the comparative text analysis can be small scale or large scale. For large scale comparison corpus

research can be helpful if one uses 'reference corpora' as a norm. An interesting way to combine the advantages of small scale qualitative text analysis and large scale corpus findings about discourse types is illustrated in Berry *et al.* (2014). The study had two goals: one was to investigate whether particular patterns of thematic choices in different registers could be linked to the dimension 'Involved versus Informational Production' in the work of Biber and colleagues (e.g. Biber *et al.* 1999). In other words, one question was to what extent Biber *et al.*'s results are reflected in configurations of thematic patterns across registers. In this way large scale corpus research and small scale manual thematic analysis were fruitfully combined to add to knowledge about interpersonal choices across registers. The second goal was SFL-intrinsic, viz. to test varied approaches within SFL to the analysis of Theme. Such descriptive work, which brings together results arrived at via different routes and accounted for in different frameworks and then attempts to establish links between them, is highly valuable.

In conclusion, Halliday's dictum that there can be no grammar without text nor text analysis without grammar should be the guiding principle. But in order to generate new knowledge which informs the theory, text analysis must use the right data and ask the right questions. While this seems self-evident enough, the risk of missing out on relevant contextual information and variables is real. As in other branches of linguistics, the old principle of old hypotheses to be tested via different routes remains mandatory.

Acknowledgements

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