Book note on Hugo Baetens Beardsmore, Language and Television

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Review
Reviewed Work(s): Language and Television by Hugo Baetens Beardsmore
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Source: Language, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Dec., 1985), pp. 932-933
Published by: Linguistic Society of America
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/414520

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through the use of numerous short passages. The assumptions defining this approach will not be familiar to most linguists interested in discourse analysis, so a brief summary is in order. The author follows the discourse approach practiced by Eugene Winters and Michael Hoey (Hatfield Polytechnic, England), whose work should be consulted for a more technical account [cf. Lg. 61.734–5]. Their approach, considering only surface features of text structure, is a descriptive analysis of selections which best exemplify its basic patterns, all reducible to the metastructure of 'situation–problem–solution–evaluation'. No support from the standard linguistic literature is presented by J for the assumptions made by this sort of text analysis, nor any comparison with other discourse analysis approaches.

The book is organized into nine chapters: 'Introduction'; 'Short texts as summaries'; 'The basic metastructure of information'; 'Incomplete, summary and condensed structures'; 'The signaling of problems and improvements'; 'Recognizing different problems in texts'; 'Evaluation principles'; 'Evaluating old and new solutions'; and 'Comparative evaluation and test procedures'. The chapters are followed by a brief 'Guide to the analysis of texts', eleven appendices, and an index. There is no bibliography.

Each chapter of the book includes examples of text passages taken from trade journals, newspapers, business reports, and popular journals. In all, 106 texts are presented for consideration. Chs. 3–9 contain the bulk of the material—Ch. 4 alone covering 22 different passages. Each chapter includes a brief set of questions for consideration, as well as a number of texts for further analysis.

The concluding guide cautions that no rigorous method for analysis can be proposed when dealing with real texts. The complexity of text structure defies simple consistent structural analyses. Rather, J suggests that texts are best analysed through 'an understanding of the basic structures, their complications and related signaling words, which can [be applied] intelligently to ... texts'.

The central premise of this book is rather loosely argued, and requires more research to be convincing. It does not deserve, on its own, treatment on this order, whether as a textbook or otherwise. It claims that the 'problem–solution' thesis is applicable to all written texts—but gives no analysis of longer passages, serious academic texts, scientific research texts, or academic essay writing. Too many features of text construction, both linguistic and rhetorical, are brushed aside or totally ignored. By and large, this approach is a recasting of rhetorical devices in a somewhat altered framework. As such, it will leave most linguists cold. However, discourse analysts may find some food for thought in this rather informal approach to text structure. [William Grabe, Northern Arizona University.]


The papers in this issue of IJSL all deal with the effects of television in multicultural, multilingual settings; and all have been written with an eye to language planning and policy. Beyond that, they are quite diverse in aims and scopes.

In their paper on Welsh-medium TV, C. J. Dodson & R. Gerallt Jones discuss the complex issues which have arisen in the planning for a new TV channel in Wales. The political background of the choices that have been made is discussed in some detail, as is the outlook for the new channel. J. J. Smolicz & M. J. Secombe describe a recent Australian experiment with a multicultural TV station, broadcasting in a large number of minority languages. On the basis of viewer surveys, they claim that the new channel has been successful in fulfilling its planners' goals of increasing Anglo-Australian awareness of other cultures, as well as providing programming for the minorities themselves. E. C. Y. Kuo describes the use of TV to promote Mandarin Chinese in Singapore. He provides evidence that viewers of various language backgrounds do watch Mandarin programming, but almost none as to whether Mandarin is actually spoken more often as a result. The lack of concrete data about the actual linguistic and attitudinal effects of TV programming is a problem common to many papers in this volume, and is acknowledged by Beardsmore in his introduction.

H. B. Beardsmore & H. van Beeck discuss the results of a survey of teenagers in Brussels—Francophones, Dutch speakers, and bilinguals—to determine which TV channels the 16-year-olds prefer to watch, and the role which
the language of transmission and/or subtitling plays in their choices. The results suggest that the quality of the programming is a more important factor than the language of transmission.

The authors suggest that TV increases speakers' receptivity for French, but not vice-versa—in line with the trend toward increased use of French in Brussels.

R. Nir analyses the problems involved in subtitling for TV in Israel—where, because of the relatively small population, the production of many local programs is prohibitively expensive. He discusses problems in translating, or 'converting', spoken dialog into condensed written subtitles, and points out that TV subtitles are a major reason why Israeli Jews need and want to become literate. The final article, by D. Gorter, describes the use of the 'Teleboard', a system for transmitting simple pictures to a TV receiver via radio waves, in the teaching of Frisian in the northern Netherlands.

Despite the lack of solid statistical information about the effects of linguistic planning for TV, the papers in this volume are interesting. They point out areas for further research about a medium which people agree is very powerful. Language and television should be of considerable interest to specialists in language planning and the media, and it should pique the curiosity of any linguist who has ever watched TV in a foreign language. [BARBARA JOHNSTONE, Georgetown University.]


The title of this small volume promises new perspectives on riddling. However, this promise is not fulfilled in any significant way, and the book is uneven in quality. What is provided is mainly an overview of the literature on the semantics of riddles, most of which has been done by folklorists.

P&G's concern is with how the riddle, as a special kind of verbal art, exploits the flexible areas of grammar and culture to create a temporary and intentional block in communication. Like other artistic genres, riddles are creative only within conventional boundaries; they are set apart from non-artistic uses of language by virtue of their being 'performed'. There are two main devices by which the communicative system of a group can be subverted in riddles: linguistic ambiguity and metaphor.

In Chs. 2–3, P&G describe how ambiguity—phonological, morphological, and syntactic—operates in riddles. They point out that ambiguity can occur either in the question or in the answer; riddles must be considered as whole units. The discussion is clear, though linguists (the book is apparently intended for folklorists) will find some of the explanations very elementary. Ch. 4 discusses riddles which depend on visualizations of graphological material, e.g. Spell enemy in three letters.—NME. Ch. 5 is a somewhat oddly-placed review of the literature on riddles. On p. 88, P&G describe what constitutes a riddle: a question-and-answer format, potentially solvable by any riddle who shares the riddler's language and world view.

Ch. 6, 'Metaphorical ambiguity', is a discussion of the differences between riddles like How is a duck like an icicle?—Both grow down, which are based on linguistic ambiguity, and ones like A thousand lights in a dish—Stars, which make use of metaphor. P&G claim, correctly, that these two riddles fall at opposite ends of a continuum, in the middle of which is What has a tongue but can't talk?—A shoe, which could be construed either as 'grammatically ambiguous' (if tongue represents two homophonous lexemes) or as 'metaphorically ambiguous' (if tongue is a polysemous lexeme, and if the now dead metaphor by which tongue came to be used to refer to part of a shoe is resurrected in the riddle).

Ch. 7 is a comparison of riddles with proverbs. While the signed of a proverb is a strategy of behavior, the signed of a riddle is mastery of the linguistic code; riddles are essentially metalinguistic, and thus are decontextualized in a way that proverbs are not. The book ends with a brief conclusion, and a postscript in which a few Spanish riddles are examined.

Throughout the volume, P&G give detailed critiques of the work of other scholars on specific aspects of riddling, so that their book often seems more like a collection of articles or book reviews than a unified argument. However, much of this material is interesting. The book is handsomely produced and, apart from a few minor inconsistencies and typographical errors, is well edited. [BARBARA JOHNSTONE, Georgetown University.]