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Based on a reception analysis of news comprehension

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# Cultural Linkage between Text and Audience

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*Based on a reception analysis of news comprehension*

David Mathieu

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## **The study of doing comprehension**

This paper derives from a cross-cultural study of the comprehension of news presented in Mathieu (2009). This larger study aims at situating comprehension in its determinant of language, culture and cognition and aspires to develop a psychology of reading as it relates to the study of communication. This paper will focus on developing the thesis that comprehension is best understood as a communicative process that binds an implicit cultural relationship between news texts and their intended audiences. More specifically, the argument of this paper is that comprehension is a cultural phenomenon, rather than a matter of perception of a stimulus, and that this cultural dimension is central in that it constrains, i.e. enables as well as disables, the creation of meaning and represents both a source of convergence and divergence in meaning-making.

One main preoccupation of early research on news comprehension (for example: van Dijk, 1987, 1988; Findhal and Höijer, 1973, 1975, 1976, 1981, 1982, 1985; Graber, 1988; Gunter, 1987) has been to measure the level or quality of comprehension through various conditions in which both the characteristics of the text and of the audience varied. In doing so, this kind of research has avoided the study of what people naturally do with text and language (Potter, 2000). Breaking with this tradition then, this project underlines the necessity to pay attention to the processes and resources by which recipients perform comprehension. Hence, the focus of this study is on the how question (how do they comprehend?) rather than the what (what do they comprehend?). The perspective adopted owes much to ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and its concern for the ethnomethods of knowledgeable agents in the performance of everyday life and the reproduction of structures and institutions.

In reception studies, comprehension is understood as a social and cultural activity (Schrøder, 2000). On the contrary, in contemporary psychology of discourse processing, comprehension is assumed to be mainly a-social and a-cultural (see Graesser [2006] for an account of this position or Zwaan and Singer [2003] for a literature review of comprehension studies in which culture is notably absent). It is obvious that the cultural dimension of comprehension is not problematized adequately in cognitive psychology, due to its methodological and conceptual inclinations (see Mathieu, 2009). What needs to be developed is a psychology of reading that goes beyond the view that cognitive processes are oriented towards perceiving and recovering what is "in there", which does not make space for the subjectivity and involvement of the reader to be taken into account, other than as error or bias.

This project is also motivated by the ambition to find an explanation to the possibility of coming to varied and plural readings of media texts<sup>1</sup>. Here the argument is not to claim that texts are polysemic or that recipients are active, something that has been convincingly illustrated through the abundance of empirical reception studies since the inception of the field. Rather, as Livingstone argued, “we cannot answer the question of how viewers actually make sense of television simply by offering up a vast diversity of individual readings made under different circumstances” (1998: 152). What we need is a psychology of the active audience.

The how question - how recipients make sense of the news - is the question articulated in this empirical study of news comprehension. This empirical study sees the activity of recipients, and their actual uses of the text, being closely monitored through a cognitive interview and interpreted in an analysis of *doing comprehension*, which implies paying attention to the processes and resources underlying comprehension, rather than an analysis of its output. Such analysis is based on a research strategy that has as its core an interest, not in an internal psychology of reading, but in making explicit the nature of communicative processes between texts and audiences.

In this paper, I will concentrate on presenting an analysis of the cultural dimension of comprehension, which was begun in Mathieu (2009) but developed here. In order to structure this analysis, I will first present the theoretical framework at the basis of this research on news comprehension: the study of Pragmatics or language in use. I will then summarise briefly the main lines of the methodology, based on a cross-cultural comparison of the comprehension processes of recipients from Denmark and Canada, monitored through individual interviews. Finally, I will turn to presenting the analysis of the “text-knowledge interface” and explains how these two are bridged by culture in comprehension.

### **The Pragmatic approach, in which “meaning is communicated, but not said”**

The general framework of this study is that of Pragmatics, a tradition of research that emerged within linguistics, but which has developed overtly in relation to other disciplines, such as cognitive science, communication and discourse analysis. As a result, the pragmatic approach is a relevant meeting point for different perspectives on comprehension.

Pragmatic thinking assumes that natural language use is largely undetermined, ambiguous or opaque, and hence needs to be determined by pragmatics processes that are context dependent. Yet, there is also something quite orderly in the natural language that people rely upon to communicate (Sack, 1992). It is a fact that people understand each other quite ordinarily and unproblematically on a daily basis. Hence, this natural ambiguity must be an important component to preserve in the study of comprehension, which should be wary of manipulating or constructing texts that are deprived of this essential quality<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The focus on the active audience in reception research has largely been framed by the study of ideologies, originating in Hall’s influential model of decoding. Here, the idea is to transpose the question into the realm of psychology.

<sup>2</sup> As a way to expel the ‘unknown’ or the ‘unwanted’ from experiments in the search for ‘univocal’ and ‘clear’ causal relationships between variables, such as this is done in the psychology of discourse processing.

The idea that language is transparent for ordinary language users, in the sense that they understand each other unproblematically, without effort, should not detract us from the observation that the very same language can be quite “opaque” (Hanks, 1996) for those who lack appropriate resources. Language is not transparent, rather it is made transparent by language users. Hence, the objective of this empirical study is to reveal the resources that competent users rely on in their comprehension of news; yet this objective is complicated precisely by these resources appearing transparent, also for the ones who rely upon them.

Meanings that are communicated through language use remain largely implicit and are not explicitly encoded in the semantics of sentences. Rather, meaning occurs in context. It is the variation in context that explains, for example, why the same sentence can have different meanings when uttered by different persons or in different situations. It is also admitted that context is a dynamic process (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992). Context is not a given, nor a container in which language is inserted. Instead, context is dynamically generated in the course of communication by language users. Recipients comprehend texts, and certainly news, in the context of their world knowledge. It is against such a backdrop of knowledge that texts take their (pragmatic) meaning. Thus, to comprehend a text is to contextualise a text.

### **A methodology of the contextual, the phenomenological and the cultural**

The objective of the design was to be able to follow and understand the contextualisation of the text by recipients through their use of (cultural) knowledge. This objective posed unusual challenges to a reception analysis, which were addressed by setting up a cross-cultural comparison of the comprehension processes of Danes and French Canadians. Both groups of recipients had to read a news text from both cultures. Each recipient was interviewed on their reading of two news texts: one about Canadian affairs and the other about Danish affairs, thus allowing comparison across groups and across texts. In total, 24 recipients were individually interviewed, 12 for each group. The interviews were adapted from the “think-aloud protocol” (Schaap [2001] is the first researcher to have applied this psychological method to the study of news) and consisted in following closely the reading of each news text, paragraph per paragraph, and probing for comprehension.

The reliance on the individual interview was chosen to obtain a phenomenological perspective on comprehension. The principles at the basis of this type of interview were to establish rapport, to reduce the expectations towards an atmosphere of test and to use prompts as a way to go deeper with what interviewees reported themselves. Although the objective of the interview brought with it a context in which comprehension was artificially in focus, special attention was paid to let recipients report on the assumptions they used in “their” contextualisation, and the role it played in “their” comprehension. In brief, the goal of this “on-line method” (Findhal, 2001) was to follow the ways recipients, from their own point of view, contextualise the text to create meanings.

The aim of the cross-cultural comparison was to assist the interpretative analysis of the cultural dimension of comprehension. The two groups were compared on their comprehension or non-comprehension of the same text. More specifically, the cross-cultural analysis attended to their (differing) uses of the text as they relate on the one hand to the knowledge brought by recipients in

their contextualisation of the text, and on the other hand to the development of a “macro-structure”<sup>3</sup> (van Dijk, 1987) or “situation model”<sup>4</sup> (van Oostendorp and Bonebakker, 1999). Through the analysis of the interviews, I observed the following uses, among others: retaining and ignoring textual elements; foregrounding or backgrounding textual elements; cotextual and contextual relations; production of hypotheses (Reboul and Moeschler, 1998) and inferences about protagonists intentions and other attributions (as in attribution theory), such as causation, explanation, prediction, etc.

The rationale of having a group of readers (i.e. Danes) reading a foreign text (i.e. Canadian news) represented a similar strategy to what has been called “doing a Garfinkel”<sup>5</sup>, that is, creating a disruptive situation to render explicit or abnormal what is ordinarily normal and implicit. This strategy, developed by Harold Garfinkel and his followers (1967) to study implicit norms at the basis of social conduct, was here used to confront each news text with a foreign audience, for which the text remained largely opaque, difficult to comprehend. This was in turn compared to the comprehension processes of the intended audience, as a way to make visible the cultural dimension that would otherwise remain largely implicit.

### **An analysis of the text-recipient interface (with due respect to the sender)**

As pointed out by Jensen: “A specific aim of qualitative audience research has been to develop a conceptual understanding of the media-audience nexus that would not privilege one or the other side” (2002: 167). In a perspective focusing on the communicative processes, both the text and the audience play a role in establishing a “common ground” (Clark, 1992) on which comprehension can be based. In the following analysis, the Pragmatic perspective is used to shed light on the communicative processes taking place at the “text-knowledge interface” (van Dijk, 2003).

On the one hand, the interpretative work of recipients is understood within the theory of problematology developed by Michel Myer (1995). For Myer, a text is an answer and its comprehension consists in finding out what it is an answer for, that is, finding out what is *problematological* in a text. The answer that a text provides to a reader is dependent on the questions that are asked to that text. In other words, the meaning of a text depends on what the recipient wants to know. Yet, the active participation of the recipient is itself enabled and limited by his/her culture, in that the meaning of a text also depends on what the recipient can and cannot know.

On the other hand, the aim of the analysis is to explain how the text suggests a context of use for the recipients. This is achieved through the impetus of “cultural models” (Gee, 1999). Cultural models refer to implicit theories or storylines connected to language use (words or sentences in context) that explain why meaning is situated in specific possibilities for a certain social or cultural group (Gee, 1999: 44). A cultural model is developed through language use within a community, and the knowledge it relates to is also dependent to such context of use.

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<sup>3</sup> In brief, a sort of summary of the story.

<sup>4</sup> What is said to be a semantic representation of the story, but that I would readily define as a subjective “definition of the situation”, to use an expression by Goffman.

<sup>5</sup> Also known as a “breaching experiment”.

The advantage of such analysis is that comprehension is both something that recipients want (answer seeking) and something that texts want (texts are made of cultural models). Comprehension is an active search for answers to questions that take their roots in the cultural models of the recipients. In other words, the text answers questions that cultural models make possible to ask. Recipients rely on the cultural models that were implicitly communicated in the text, through language in context. Comprehension is thus a communicative process that binds an implicit cultural relationship between a text and its intended audience.

In studies of comprehension (and of communication), the role of the sender has diminished over the years, as the recovery of the author's intentions has been regarded as increasingly marginal and problematic<sup>6</sup>. Attention to the sender in the communication circuit has been replaced by an emphasis on the language, the sign, the text. Instead of looking at communicative processes, research has concentrated much on the text-recipient nexus and has conceived the text has something to be read and the recipient as a reader of a text. As a result, this research offers a conception of meaning-making as the sole outcome of the interaction between texts and recipients. However, the place of the author is still important in a theory of comprehension, as comprehension must necessarily relate to the "message sent". How it does is still an open question.

In recent view of comprehension, the author plays no role and comprehension is dis-jointed from the sender. The view of comprehension that I put forward offers a way to pay due attention to the sender, while remaining in a model of the text-recipient nexus. In this conception of comprehension, the sender is considered from the perspective of the implicit assumptions that he/she brings to the communication. The sender communicates, not solely by means of his/her authorial intentions, but as a member of a culture and with help of context. The intentions of the sender only makes sense as they are part of a larger context of culture and these intentions depends on this cultural context for their intelligibility<sup>7</sup>.

Context effectively links senders, texts and recipients together so that the communication circuit does not take place in a vacuum. Instead, this communication process not only needs to be inserted in context for its intelligibility, as claimed by interpretative research, but it also relies on context for its effectivity as a communication process for the actors themselves. Recipients need to rely on this context to comprehend the news. In other words, the message sent, even though it remains undefined as a textual concept, is bound by cultural context with its intended audience.

Afterall, comprehension still need to be defined as the correct reception of a message sent. Yet, this message sent is not conceptualised as narrowly intentional, but also contextual, and correctedness is not so much representational than problematological. Comprehension is not simply a matter of representing a text or its implicit meaning, but is an active search for meaning that is best described as a problematisation.

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<sup>6</sup> Marginal in relation to the study of the sign, of culture and of ideology and problematic in that it became increasingly difficult to sustain the idea that a text has a single, uniform message and to say what this message consists of.

<sup>7</sup> Senders communicate like fishes swim in the ocean. And the water is as important for the way the fish moves than context is for the way we communicate.

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