'Sailing the islands or watching from the dock':
the treacherous simplicity of a metaphor. How we handle
'new (electronic) hypertext' versus 'old (printed) text'

Wolfram Bublitz
University of Augsburg

Abstract

This paper looks at the validity of two tightly interrelated linguistic dogmas. They state
that the dyadic nature of human communication is an indispensable precondition for
negotiating meaning, which is understood as a dyadic, transitive and reciprocal act
requiring two interactants. It will be shown that since the advent of the new electronic
media, both dogmas have been subject to a process of gradual erosion. Some forms of
computer mediated communication have altered our understanding of participation as a
dyadic and focussed concept. Furthermore, despite their amazing possibilities and
extraordinary interactive potential (which, however, is at least partly counteracted by the
extremely high degree of fragmentarization), interacting with new electronic media does
not per se guarantee easier understanding, i.e. an easier access to the world 'behind the
screen' than when interacting with 'old' printed media. It is argued that the user's situation
is not essentially different from the familiar situation of the reader who is trying to
understand printed text.

1. Introduction: even eternal truths are not what they used to be

Outside grammar, there are not very many 'eternal truths' in the science of
linguistics. Arguably, that duality (i.e. dyadic orientation) is a basic feature of
human communication, is one of them, and that meaning is always negotiated
meaning, is another. These two dogmas are tightly interrelated. They cohere
because negotiating meaning is dyadic by nature in that it is a transitive and
reciprocal act requiring two interactants. Hence, the dyadic character of human
communication is an indispensable precondition for semiosis, i.e. the act or
process of meaning-making (in the Peircean sense).

As is sometimes the case with everlasting truths, however, an
unforeseeable change of their conditional fundaments can lead to their erosion.
As I will argue in my paper, this appears to have happened with duality as a
dogmatic feature of human communication. Since the advent of the new
electronic media, it has been subject to a process of gradual erosion and is no
longer unrestrictedly valid for both 'old' (spoken and written) and 'new' electronic
media. Some forms of computer mediated communication (CMC) in particular
have altered our understanding of participation as a dyadic and focussed concept,
and have also made negotiating meaning and thus understanding more difficult.
The latter may come as a surprise because the possibilities of the electronically
administered new media with their literally infinite number of audio-visual data are widely regarded as an asset rather than as an impediment to composition and thought. But, as we will see, the interactive potential of CMC is (at least partly) counteracted by the high degree of fragmentarization (with all its consequences). Thus, despite its extraordinary possibilities, interacting with this new medium does not \textit{per se} guarantee easier understanding, i.e. an easier access to the world 'behind the screen' than when interacting with old media. In actual fact, the user's situation is not \textit{essentially} different from the familiar situation of the reader who, when reading a book, a handbook or a newspaper, is trying to understand, i.e. to create his or her own inner world.

2. \textbf{Communication is not as dyadic as is generally assumed}

Among the long-established dogmas that spring to mind when studying how communication works is the following: Human communication is most obviously characterised by its speaker/writer – hearer/reader symmetry, i.e. its dual or dyadic orientation. To communicate means for someone to communicate with someone else; it is a reciprocal act.\footnote{As a fundamental principle, this time-honoured dictum has seldom been queried in its entirety, though every now and then in some of its aspects (as I will show presently). A succinct description was provided by Wilhelm von Humboldt. In an article about \textit{dual} as a grammatical number (besides singular and plural), he reflected in a more general way on \textit{duality} as a universal communicative principle:}

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Duality is the most obvious defining feature of two-party talk as the archetypical kind of spoken face-to-face communication in a homogeneous and focussed social setting. Human verbal communication is by nature dialogic. At closer inspection, however, neither the prototypical speaker nor the prototypical hearer are monolithic concepts but fusions of various conceptual roles. To take a simple example from the production side of verbal interchange: The \textit{speaker}, the \textit{author} and the \textit{source} of a piece of text can be \textit{three} different persons (e.g., a government spokesman reading out a secretary's account of a cabinet minister's ideas to a journalist), \textit{two} different persons (the secretary reading out her own account of a cabinet minister's ideas to a journalist), or just \textit{one} person (the cabinet minister telling the journalist herself her ideas). Or, focussing on the reception side, that the \textit{hearer} of an utterance is not necessarily its \textit{addressee} (i.e.