

***Speakers, Listeners and Communication: Explorations in Discourse Analysis*** by Gillian Brown. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 251 pp.

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Students of language use have long acknowledged that communication is a collaborative process between speakers and listeners. Yet, many studies of discourse de-emphasize the role of the listener in this process in favor of a focus on the speaker, upon whom the burden of responsibility for the success or failure of the exchange is seen to rest. Gillian Brown's *Speakers, Listeners and Communication. Explorations in Discourse Analysis* is a welcome attempt to correct this imbalance and to restore to listeners their rightful place in the communicative process.

With its focus on language *use*, the book is written primarily for those with an interest in a pragmatic approach to discourse analysis. Its core consists of an analysis of transcripts of conversations in which participants exchanged information in order to perform specific tasks. The first of these tasks, the Map Task, required speakers to describe a route on a map to listeners, who then drew the route on their own maps. In the second task, the Stolen Letter Task, pairs or groups of subjects separately viewed different scenes from a video story and then came together to reconstruct the sequence of events. The participants in the study were drawn from schools and universities in Edinburgh (Scotland) and Essex (England) and represented a variety of ages, socio-economic backgrounds, and levels of academic ability.

In the opening chapters, Brown discusses several issues in the field of discourse analysis that impact her current study, in particular the question of "correct interpretation" vs. "adequate interpretation" and choice of methodology. She argues that her task-based methodology allows the researcher to more easily determine whether listeners have "adequately" interpreted an utterance by looking at how well they were able to perform the required task, and avoids what she sees as an inherent danger in the ethnographic approach, in which an interpretation of an utterance may be distorted by the analyst's own biases.

The remainder of the book consists of an analysis of the data, with a particular focus on reference. For the Map Task, Brown examines situations in which problems ensue because of lack of agreement between speaker and listener about the specific referent for a given expression or when the referent named by the speaker is not included on the listener's map. Similar problems arise in the Stolen Letter Task, as successful completion of the task requires participants to come to some

agreement about how to refer to the three nameless young women who are the characters in the video drama. Brown notes that in spite of these problems and the often vague and unspecified language used by the speakers, in most cases the listeners were able to successfully interpret the utterances. The primary listener strategy that Brown observed was the construction of what she terms a "search field" which enables listeners to select from the information provided by the speaker only that which is relevant to the listener's task. In the Map Task, this search field limits the listeners to a specific area of the map, beyond which they do not look for the referent. In the Stolen Letter Task, the search field restricts anaphoric reference to the closest possible referent; for example, listeners always interpret 'she' as referring to the woman most recently mentioned and not to any of the other women in the story. Brown concludes with a summary of how the listener, through questions and indications of understanding, works with the speaker to establish mutually shared knowledge and thus plays an important role in determining the success or failure of any communication.

The stated aim of this book is to describe listeners' responses in conversations as a means of furthering our understanding of the process of communication. To a great extent, this aim is met. The analysis of the data is clear, detailed, and liberally illustrated with selections from the transcripts. Brown's careful and thoughtful discussion of the features that she notices in the interactions contribute much to attempts to unravel the invisible process by which a utterance is interpreted by a listener. Her steadfast focus on how the listener actually responded to an utterance rather than conjectures on what the listener "might have thought" is much appreciated. An objection might be made, however, to the artificiality of the situations in which the data were collected and thus the subsequent lack of relevance of her analysis to more "natural" language situations. Even Brown herself acknowledges that her "task-based" format has its limitations and perhaps may better be seen as a complement, rather than an alternative, to sociological and ethnographic approaches.

Overall, this book has much to recommend it. Brown writes clearly and with a minimum of jargon and provides sufficient background information on discourse analysis to make the book accessible even to those whose previous knowledge of the field is limited. Her research methodology is well documented and explained and her conclusions are well-supported by her data. The reader, however, may occasionally find it difficult to follow the discussions, particularly in the Stolen Letter Task where, not having seen the video in question, one can easily get lost in the complex transcripts. Similarly, it would have been helpful to have an example of the map used in the Map Task to get a clearer idea of what the participants were talking about. In addition, Brown made numerous puzzling references to "less academically successful" students, who sometimes appeared to be having difficulty communicating. Since Brown does not define what she means by "less academically successful" or make any explicit connection between the students' lack of success at school and lack of success at doing these tasks, one wonders

why she mentions it at all. Finally, it should be emphasized that this book provides description, not interpretation or application, of what Brown observes in her data. Depending on one's point of view, this focus may be seen as a strength or a weakness. While one can understand and appreciate Brown's reluctance to over interpret and over generalize, the reader may be left at the end wondering how this wealth of information fits into the larger picture.

The narrow and specific focus of *Speakers, Listeners and Communication* makes it more suitable for the specialist than the generalist. The language teacher looking for a direct application to the classroom or the sociologist looking for an analysis of interpersonal relationships between speakers and listeners will find little of interest here. Still, for anyone looking for a well-written discussion of the listener's role in the collaborative process that occurs in task-based communication, this book is well worth reading.

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