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## Abstract

Against the background of an academic development starting in literary studies, also involving ‘encounters’ with hermeneutics, this article argues that the contemporary cross-discipline of Discourse Studies, and hence Critical Discourse Studies, have gone beyond the impressionistic or erudite ‘interpretation’ of (literary) texts, as traditionally practiced in hermeneutics. It is summarized how psychology today accounts for many of the properties of the semantic and pragmatic comprehension of situated text and talk, for instance in terms of mental models. It thus makes explicit processes that are only vaguely characterized in terms of the metaphors of the interpretative ‘Arc’ as presented by Ricoeur. Yet we have only begun to make explicit the complex processes of discourse comprehension, especially also how structures of discourse are related to broader social, political, historical or cultural macro-contexts. Sophisticated discourse interpretations, also in hermeneutics, may thus provide insights that may be used in future developments of more explicit theories of discourse understanding.

## Keywords

cognitive psychology, discourse analysis, discourse comprehension, discourse studies, hermeneutics, interpretation, mental models

## Introduction

It is not my habit to talk about my academic development in my scholarly articles, but on this occasion a brief personal account of some of my early research experiences may be useful to better understand my comments on Allan Bell’s inspiring paper on the role of hermeneutics in contemporary discourse studies.

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### French structuralism

My first academic degree in Amsterdam was in French Language and Literature (and then I studied twice in France, in 1966 and 1969). It was during these studies that I first learned about traditional, on the one hand, historical and philological and on the other hand, impressionistic and interpretative, approaches to literature, as well as the well-known French tradition of *explication de texte*. As a visiting PhD student in Paris in 1969, I also became a close witness of the development of structuralism in linguistics, semiotics and poetics, while participating in the classes of Barthes and Greimas, and having conversations with (then) young scholars such as Todorov and Kristeva. Hence, it is not surprising that my two MA theses, part of my PhD thesis and my first papers and books dealt with such topics as the structural semantics of (surrealist) poetry and the foundations of modern literary theory. At the same time, in Amsterdam, I took another degree, the first (with another student) to obtain such a degree, in the newly founded department of General Literary Studies (*Algemene Literatuurwetenschap*) which aimed to study literature in more general, theoretical and comparative ways, as general linguistics does with language. Preparing (the equivalent of) an MA thesis on linguistics and poetics for this new degree, I for the first time read about hermeneutics, which I also acknowledged in 1971 in my first book – in Dutch – on theory of literature as well as in my PhD thesis on text grammar in 1972. Together with Aristotelian poetics I saw medieval hermeneutics as part of the history of literary theory and of general literary studies, more generally.

It was also during these studies of literature at the end of the 1960s that I became increasingly critical of more traditional, impressionistic approaches in literature, including theories of the novel, New Criticism and *explication de texte*. For me, the paradigms to be emulated then were at first French structuralism, the new discipline of semiotics, and in general the influence of modern linguistics in the study of literature. The Russian Formalists, on the one hand studying literature (Šklovskij et al.), and on the other hand Russian Folktales (Propp), exercised their belated influence on the French structuralists (Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Greimas, Todorov, et al.) as well as on my own early work.

### Generative linguistics

However, under the influence of the emerging generative linguistics of Chomsky, and in particular of the generative semantics of Lakoff, McCawley and others, I soon also began to take some critical distance from structuralist approaches – of course, heavily opposed by structuralists such as Greimas, who showed little comprehension and less acceptance when I dared to talk about generative semantics in one of his seminars in the laboratory of Lévi-Strauss or in one of my early articles that he included in an edited book.

Finally, in the 1970s, initially with my thesis on text grammar, and then completely with my (quite formalistic) *Text and Context* book in 1977, I left the field of literature – and only occasionally wrote about that later (e.g. in a Dutch book on teaching literature at school). Henceforth, I focused my research on discourse linguistics (e.g. on coherence, macrostructures, etc.), at first, and later on more general, multidisciplinary discourse studies, including the cognitive psychology of discourse processing, the study of news in

the press, racist discourse, ideology, context, power and knowledge – generally within the framework of Critical Discourse Studies, as from 1980 until today (for references to my earlier work, see the publication list on my website – [www.discourses.org](http://www.discourses.org)).

### The ‘Methodenstreit’

In sum, my first studies of literature, and then of discourse more generally, were initially influenced by structuralist and generative linguistics. In such an academic context, the description of poetry was supposed to be systematic and explicit, focusing on structures at several levels of analysis, and with the aim to formulate precise rules for their ‘generation’ (structural analysis). I reasoned that if people acquire a (text) grammar that enables them to produce and understand well-formed texts, then some of them might well have a ‘literary competence’ featuring specific rules to produce the poetic and narrative structures typical of literary texts.

Such formalistic accounts of texts were hardly tolerant with the more interpretative approaches in traditional literary scholarship and hermeneutics – based not so much on systematic and reliable (replicable) analysis, but rather on the erudition and the literary *Fingerspitzengefühl* (sensitivity) of great scholars. In such a tradition, students do not systematically learn how to *analyze* (categories, methods), but rather how to *imitate* the (invariably male) Great Masters – a tradition that continues unabatedly in much of contemporary literary studies, philosophy as well as linguistics today. Ricoeur, as well as many other well-known French scholars (e.g. Derrida) of different directions of research, are part of that tradition, which combines elegant style with originality in interpretation, especially of works of art. Ordinary text and talk in everyday life seldom were the objects of such scholars, but would later become a major object of research in conversation analysis, in particular, and in discourse studies, in general. One of the striking features of these literary and hermeneutic essays is the ample use of metaphor, instead of more explicit theoretical notions, as we also see in the quotes of Ricoeur in Allan Bell’s paper – summarized by the metaphorical concept of the interpretative ‘Arc’.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were also the time of the debate on the foundations of the social sciences and the humanities: the well-known *Methodenstreit*. Besides Lévi-Strauss and Barthes in France and then Chomsky in the USA, among many others, we read Popper and heavy, multivolume treatises of German *Grundlagenforschung* (Stegmüller et al.). Structural and generative linguistics and poetics at the time definitely took a more formalistic and positivistic stance against the defenders of ‘interpretation’ in the tradition of Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer. Their followers (such as Jauss) in Germany were often associated with the authoritarian *Professorenuniversität* and the political right: Heidegger’s active role in Nazi Germany was well-known, Gadamer was largely a passive participant, but Jauss appeared to have been a member of the SS – but could still become a full professor in the German city of Konstanz. It was probably not a coincidence that precisely in this newly founded university of Konstanz, due to the presence of Peter Hartmann – the first to advocate text grammars in the mid-1960s – our group of text linguists (Petöfi, Rieser, Ihwe) became active, and at the same time advocated more democratic university politics and struggled against virulent anti-communist practices (*Berufsverbot*) in Germany, the country where I spent much time in the early 1970s.

Thus, rather unexpectedly, structuralist and generative formalism (and the example of Chomsky's political publications) in (text) linguistics and poetics became associated with progressive politics, whereas traditional, interpretative literary scholars were close to more conservative ideologies and practices. Hence, in my own intellectual history, hermeneutics was not only associated with traditional, impressionistic literary studies and criticism, but also with political conservatism. No doubt my critical opinion of hermeneutics today is also influenced by these earlier academic and sociopolitical experiences, especially in France and Germany.

### *From text grammar to Critical Discourse Studies*

Today, several decades later, I have become quite critical of exclusively formalistic (structural, generative) accounts of literature and of discourse in general, especially because they largely ignored the sociocognitive, social and political contexts of text and talk. But that does not mean that I would want to advocate a return to a more impressionistic and informal hermeneutics. On the contrary, any explicit study of discourse, and hence also a more sociopolitical critical study, needs to be based on an explicit and systematic account of formal structures of discourse, including those of meaning. Contemporary discourse studies has many and quite different directions of research, featuring linguistic, cognitive, social, cultural and political theories and methods, but generally is more descriptive and explanatory than normative. It does not tell readers how they *should* understand a text, but rather studies how different types of readers actually do so in different contexts. It develops theories of the structures and strategies of any type of text and talk, how discourses are produced and understood by language users and how discourses are related to communicative, social, political and cultural situations, as well as many methods for the systematic and explicit analysis of these phenomena. In that sense contemporary discourse and literary studies are essentially different from traditional literary criticism and hermeneutics aiming at the evaluation and normative understanding of works of art.

### **On interpretation**

In order to elaborate this point of view, I shall briefly focus on the key concept of hermeneutics: *understanding* or *interpretation* (*Verstehen*). Some 30–40 years after the first structuralist and generativist approaches to discourse, providing various formalist (grammatical, narrative, argumentative, etc.) accounts of the structures of text and talk, we now know much more about how language users actually produce and especially how they *comprehend* or *understand* discourse. Cognitive psychology, Artificial Intelligence and the neurosciences today offer increasingly sophisticated theories of the mental/neural processes and representations involved in discourse processing and interaction (see e.g. the commentary by Yeari and Van den Broek, in this issue). Any kind of literary, social or political interpretation of discourse in general, and of works of art in particular, is assumed to presuppose such mental processes of discourse understanding. Instead of formulating lay or expert intuitions about reading and understanding, as happens in

hermeneutics, such an account describes and explains how, at various levels of structure, language users actually and strategically assign (semantic) meanings to words, clauses, sentences, paragraphs or larger structures to discourse, and how these semantic representations are related to models of individual language users and general world knowledge shared by epistemic communities.

### *Mental models*

Hence, today the interpretation of text and talk may first of all be defined in terms of semantic representations as they are based on the *subjective mental models* of language users, that is, representations in Episodic Memory of the situation (events, actions, persons, etc.) referred to by the speaker or writer. These hierarchical mental models are gradually construed, through complex (auditory, visual, lexical, syntactic, multimodal) processes in working memory. They may also feature opinions as well as emotions associated with the events talked about. Thus, understanding discourse is related to the way people more generally *understand situations* and represent their *experiences* in mental models, typically consisting of a Setting (Time, Place), Participants (and their Identities, Roles and Relations), one or more Events and Actions, as well as the Intentions/Goals and the Knowledge of the participants. If they deal with interesting human actions, such models are typically expressed in stories and news.

These models not only explain understanding, but at the same time also how discourse is planned, produced and later remembered and updated.

### *Knowledge*

Although each mental model of a discourse is personal and unique, it is obviously not totally idiosyncratic. Mental models are not only shaped by the information of unique text or talk and by earlier mental models (personal experiences, including of previous discourses) in the autobiographical memory of language users, but at the same time by the instantiation or application of general world *knowledge* shared by the epistemic communities of which the language user is a member. It is the task of the cognitive psychology of discourse to make explicit the internal (situation) structures of these mental models and the processes of their construction, their relations with the complex structures of knowledge, their updating with new information, as well as their use in later discourse production and understanding.

The structures and the role of knowledge in discourse processing – for instance, in the construction of mental models – have been studied quite extensively in cognitive psychology. However, this is not the case for other types of socially shared cognition, such as ideologies. Yet obviously a (same) discourse is quite differently understood whether the hearer or the reader is progressive or conservative, a racist or an anti-racist, a feminist or a male chauvinist, a socialist or a neoliberal. Hence semantic models are also influenced by the underlying ideologies of the recipients. We here have another dimension in the explanation of the variation of discourse understanding – as we shall see below for the role of context more generally.

### *Implicit and explicit meaning*

Crucial for our account of discourse understanding is that mental models are typically much larger than the semantic representations (of the sentences) of the text. Discourses in that respect are like icebergs: most of their meanings are *implicit*. Implicit meanings are part of the mental models of the language users, but are not explicitly expressed in the text. They are *presupposed* by the speaker/writer to be inferable from explicit meanings in the text as well as from the personal and the socioculturally shared (world) knowledge of the hearer/reader. Such inferences are, for instance, necessary to establish the local and global coherence of the text, as well as to make predictions of what is likely to follow in discourse and interaction.

We see that *semantic understanding* is not limited to the construction of actually expressed meanings of discourse (*intensional understanding*), but rather involves the construction of mental models of what the discourse is about (*referential* or *extensional understanding*). Since all language users construe their own mental models, also depending on their earlier personal experiences (old models as recorded in autobiographical memory), speakers and hearers by definition have (at least slightly) different mental models of their discourse, that is different understandings.

We may summarize these complex processes with the term *semantic comprehension* – a first and basic aspect of all discourse understanding and interpretation in more general terms. This is more or less the current state of the art in the psychology of discourse.

### *Context models*

Yet such an account of understanding is obviously incomplete. Language users not only understand discourse in isolation (or in the laboratory), but in real communicative and social situations. The ‘same’ discourse is not only understood (at least slightly) differently by different language users (who each have their own mental model of the discourse), but more generally so in different contexts. Hence, we also need to account for what we may call *pragmatic comprehension*.

Thus, depending on the appropriateness conditions of the context, an utterance may be understood as a threat or a promise. The same text may sometimes be read as a novel or political pamphlet, be seen as informative or manipulative, as polite or impolite, and so on – all depending on the context.

However, such a (formally or informally) descriptive account is insufficient if we do not account more explicitly for what contexts are and how they are related to text and talk. Thus, appropriateness conditions of speech acts are typically part of such contexts. But so are, more generally, Settings (Time and Place), Participants (Identities, Roles, Relations), Intentions/Goals, the current social Act(s) being engaged in at various levels of specificity and generality, as well as the Knowledge of the participants.

We thus not only account for speech acts, but also for deictic expressions and reflexivity, politeness phenomena exhibiting social relations between participants, Evidentiality, Common Ground and News, sentence topic and focus, presuppositions, discourse genres, as well as many other pragmatic aspects of discourse defining the appropriateness or reflexivity of the discourse in the communicative situation.

Notice though that *the context, strictly speaking, is not a set of objective social parameters of the communicative situation*, as is suggested by sociolinguistics, but a *subjective definition* by each participant of what is relevant (at each moment) in such a situation. Again, we may now use the fundamental concept of the mental model again, this time not to account for the subjective representation of the situation talked *about*, but for the subjective definition of the very communicative situation *in which* the participants currently participate. These *context models* of language users account for the *pragmatic comprehension* of discourse.

Context models are *egocentric*. As all mental models they are subjectively construed around the core of a *Self* as constituted in Episodic Memory on the basis of our personal and social experiences. So, if – as Ricoeur and Bell suggest – discourse interpretation is an ‘encounter’ with Self, we need to go beyond such metaphors and elaborate in detail how such a Self is represented in the semantic and pragmatic models that define interpretation.

### *Intentions*

A crucial dimension of context models is the representation of the *Intentions* or *Goals* of the participants, as is the case for the representation of action in interaction as well as for the definition of many discourse genres. Both traditional literary scholarship (l’Art pour l’Art, New Criticism, hermeneutics) as well as many formalist approaches (including Conversation Analysis, Discursive Psychology, etc.) banned speaker or author intentions as beyond the pale of scholarship, supposedly because readers and analysts don’t have access to them or because such intentions would be irrelevant for comprehension. Something similar was argued in behaviorism banning meaning from linguistics. Yet it is being overlooked that in everyday language use we *automatically* try to understand what speakers or authors mean and intend with their text or talk. Even when we don’t know exactly what language users intend, their discourse is thus interpreted by making plausible inferences about such intentions, and in everyday life this functions quite well. If we have doubts about such intentions, we usually (may) ask: ‘What do you mean?’, ‘What do you want?’

The very notion of ‘text itself’ – as the object of study in these directions of research – is quite problematical in the first place. For instance, does such a concept include meaning, even when we know that meaning can hardly be heard or observed on the page, but is construed by participants – both writers and readers? More generally today, discourse is conceived of more broadly as a complete communicative event, that is, as multimodal text in context – and this obviously includes the intentions of the writers.

So, banning the study of intentions from the study of language and discourse, as is the case in (some branches of) literary studies, hermeneutics and discourse studies, is a well-known, arbitrary, normative and hence ideological form of theoretical and methodological exclusion that is quite inconsistent with what actually goes on in understanding. It is a different – methodological or practical – question whether or not we have access to such speaker or writer intentions.

We now know from cognitive and neurological research that humans from an early age on have the ability, possibly based on ‘mirror neurons’, to ‘read the minds’ of or feel



empathy with their interlocutors, and use efficient strategies to infer intentions of others in action, interaction and conversation. In that sense, pragmatic understanding of discourse by recipients is nearly always understanding (modeling) the intentions of the speaker or author.

As is the case for semantic models, also context models are ad hoc, personal and subjective and may feature evaluative and emotional elements: people not only have opinions or emotions about events talked *about*, but also about the people they are now talking to, as well as the current communicative situation itself. Indeed, communicative situations are (processed much) like any other experience in our everyday lives, and we are able to manage their vast cognitive and social complexity by the strategic use of mental models.

Current research in psychology and other neurosciences emphasizes that our knowledge and experiences, and hence our mental models, are 'embodied' and multi-modal. Thus, speaking, writing, reading, listening – and in general interaction and communication – involve visual, auditory, sensorimotor, emotional and spatial dimensions, as is the case for all our social experiences. Hence these dimensions should all be represented, in variable degrees and at several levels, both in our semantic models of situations being described as well as in the pragmatic context models of the communicative situation now being participated in. It is also as such that communicative situations may be recalled and updated, and how inferences are made about the intentions as well as other properties of the speaker or writer.

Just like semantic models of situations talked about, pragmatic context models are also based on socially shared (lay) knowledge about communication, genres, styles and language use – and hence enable understandable, intersubjective communication and interaction in the first place. And conversely, we acquire such general knowledge not only by explicit teaching (schooling), but also by the generalization and abstraction from context models, that is, from our everyday communicative and discursive experiences.

Context models are *dynamic*. At each point in ongoing talk, text production and comprehension, one of the context parameters may change, so that also the discourse and its understanding may change – as is ongoingly the case for time and the knowledge of the participant, which typically changes after each proposition or speech act.

Although an account in terms of context models adds a crucial dimension to our cognitive theory of discourse production and comprehension and at the same time provides a more explicit basis to pragmatic theory, we still need to describe and explain how exactly language users ongoingly construe and update such models, how these models control the actual expression of underlying semantic mental models in the production of the semantic representations of text and talk and finally their expression in lexical, syntactic, phonetic, visual or other multimodal structures. Indeed, pragmatic models not only control the production of *what* is now appropriate to say (and what not), but especially also *how* it should be said – so that they also account for style, register and any other situationally variable use of verbal and non-verbal resources. In other words, context models provide another dimension of detailed descriptive-explanatory theory of understanding, rather than a normative practice of commentary or criticism.

We see that a more explicit theory of the cognitive processes and representations involved in discourse production and comprehension provides a more detailed, more

explicit and empirically warranted account of what understanding and interpretation is all about – not of how it should be taking place, but how it actually and ongoingly occurs.

## Macro-contexts

After this brief summary of an alternative approach to discourse understanding, and hence to the subject matter of hermeneutics, we may ask whether some crucial dimension is still missing. So far, we have limited our account to the modeling of the communicative situation, that is, to social micro-contexts. But speakers, writers, listeners and readers may also want to relate ongoing discourse to broader social and political situations, that is, to social macro-contexts. Ignoring the well-known micro–macro debate in sociology – dealing with the opposition between individual *agency* and social *structure* – we shall on the one hand assume that macro-contexts structurally consist of micro-contexts, but that (represented) macro-contexts provide the overall coherence and hence further explanation of (complexes of) micro-contexts – much in the same way as the relation between macrostructures and microstructures in discourse.

The crucial difference with an abstract sociological account of agency and structure, however, is that both social microstructures as well as social macrostructures can only influence the production and comprehension of discourse through (subjective and intersubjective) mental models of the language users. In other words, the relations between discourse and society always need the sociocognitive interface of actual language users.

Hence, language users not only have micro-context models but also macro-context models. A speaker may model the ongoing dialogue in the classroom at the micro-level, but at the same time be (partly) conscious of her role and function as a teacher, and the way the current class fits this year's program, departmental activities and the university as an institution. In the same way, one may read and understand this poem or novel, and relate it not only to one's personal situation, or that of the writer, but also to knowledge of a specific historical or literary period, style or artistic movement.

Since speakers and hearers each have their own context models of the current discourse, hearers may of course interpret the ongoing discourse in a different way by associating it with a different macro context model – for example, a student's model of professors or institutions as indoctrinating or manipulating their students, a model that may in turn be related to the previous experiences (old models) of the hearer, as well as to socially shared knowledge and ideologies.

With this extension of current context-theory we have explained how naïve language users, as well as critics and analysts, go about understanding discourse. Obviously, if we want to reconstruct the communicative and social context models of authors (especially of those to whom we have no longer access), including their intentions and the semantic models that represent the meanings of their texts, we may have to engage in complex historical, social or psychological study – part of which traditional philology and hermeneutics provide.

Conversely, if we want to investigate how actual readers understand discourse, and hence what kind of semantic and pragmatic models they construe during reading or listening, we may use our own intuitive self-observations, as in literary criticism and much of

practical hermeneutics, or we may engage in empirical study, for instance by such methods as think-aloud protocols, recall, priming, paraphrasing, interviews, and so on.

## Hermeneutics and discourse studies

After what has been argued above, hermeneutics in my view only has a place and future in contemporary discourse studies if it is based on our current and ongoingly updated theories of discourse production and understanding as it is accounted for in various disciplines. We now know that various kinds of discourse understanding involve:

- the strategic processing of text and talk at all levels of structure;
- the construction and updating of various kinds of (semantic and pragmatic) mental models, influenced by the activation of old models (previous experiences), that are:
  - subjectively construed and changed in Working Memory and stored in Episodic Memory of language users,
  - and based on general sociocultural knowledge and other socially shared representations (e.g. norms, values and ideologies).

If we define the multidisciplinary field of Discourse Studies in a very broad way, also including literary scholarship, literary criticism, rhetoric, (parts of) semiotics, as well as much discourse research in the social sciences and humanities, then obviously hermeneutics is part of Discourse Studies (and obviously not the other way around, since Discourse Studies deals with vastly more phenomena, issues and problems than hermeneutics). In this case, hermeneutics may contribute especially to our understanding of historical and literary discourse, for example, by spelling out parameters of social, cultural and historical situations that may have influenced the text through the ways the authors have represented such situations.

However, if hermeneutics claims to provide a theory and practice of actual discourse understanding by language users, it only has a future in contemporary Discourse Studies if it is based on the kinds of theoretical and empirical insights that have been developed during the last decades, for example, in the cognitive and social psychology of discourse processing, as well as in the sociology and anthropology of text and talk.

We should not forget that *understanding is understanding by language users*, social actors and cultural members, and we need many disciplines and their theories, methods and other insights in order to make this very complex human activity explicit. This is one major aim of contemporary Discourse Studies. In that sense, Discourse Studies today is accomplishing many – if not all – of the traditional tasks of hermeneutics, and many more, and does so more explicitly (more theory), more systematically (more methods) and much better empirically grounded in observation and experiment.

## Some final comments

After these more general remarks on the nature and the role of understanding and interpretation in contemporary, multidisciplinary Discourse Studies – and other disciplines – I shall make some final comments on Allan Bell's inspiring article.

*Diversity.* It is always relevant and interesting to bring the work of present or past scholars to the attention of the international academic community if such work was unduly ignored outside of their country or discipline, as was the case for Bakhtin and the Russian Formalists, among many others. Although Ricoeur obviously has been widely translated, read and cited not only in France but also internationally, especially in literary studies, history and the other humanities, such is not the case in much of contemporary discourse studies. The same is true for hermeneutics as a direction of research in a broadly conceived study of discourse. Hence, Allan Bell's article, as well as the commentaries on his article in this special issue, are a welcome contribution to the diversity of the field: we always learn from such encounters, even when we disagree with their theoretical or practical proposals – if only to make our own approach more explicit.

*Disciplinary development.* As briefly summarized above, the cross-discipline of contemporary Discourse Studies for nearly half a century already, has become of age and now features sophisticated theories and methods that account for many of the dimensions of situated text and talk, including their understanding and comprehension. Modern literary theory, especially its empirical directions of research, has been extensively influenced by these developments (as we may see in later developments of the journal *Poetics*, the first journal I was glad to be able to found and edit in the 1970s and 1980s). I do not claim, however, that our current theoretical insights into discourse understanding by any means account for all aspects or dimensions of this complex activity. We still do not know all details of how readers understand the complexities of a (seemingly simple) everyday conversation, on the one hand, or a modern poem, on the other hand. With cognitive psychologists I assume that this activity involves the construction of mental models on the basis of socioculturally shared knowledge (as well as group ideologies), but no doubt we have only started to grasp the basics of such a process.

*Permanent learning.* Above I have been critical of traditional, impressionistic and normative approaches to the study of literature – and advocated a theory-based, explicit, systematic and empirical study of any type of text and talk. This does not mean that we cannot learn from other approaches to discourse and literature, as well as from sophisticated interpretations of great scholars – for instance, about dimensions of discourse and their interpretation we had ignored in our own theoretical models, as was the case, and still is the case, for the role of local and global contexts and their personal modeling in the psychology of discourse processing. Ricoeur, and other prominent scholars like him, have thus provided insights into understanding we still need to deal with in more explicit theoretical terms, such as the ways lay readers or literary critics relate texts with social, political and cultural contexts. Cognitive psychology has so far shown little interest in the systematic study of the role of local or global contexts in the understanding of discourse. Earlier it had to learn from narrative theories, also in the field of literature, in order to account for the processes involved in the production and comprehension of stories, and no doubt the same is true for many other dimensions of discourse largely ignored in the cognitive psychology of discourse processing, as is the case for style and rhetoric.

*Interpretation versus investigation.* The stages of interpretation summarized by the metaphor of the Interpretative Arc, as described by Ricoeur, may well correspond to different kinds of understanding as a function of various kinds of prior knowledge. But it is

one thing to speculate on such different forms, stages or levels of interpretation, and quite another to spell out (and test) in detail the mental processes and representations involved in these different ways of reading a text, and what role knowledge plays exactly in such interpretative differences. And it is one thing to write a beautiful personal interpretation, and again another (more democratic) thing to develop systematic methods of analysis that can be taught and learned by students. Obviously, the following metaphorical ‘method’, as described by Ricoeur and cited and explained by Allan Bell, won’t do in the classroom or in an investigation:

To understand is  
to place ourselves in front of the text  
so we can unfold or disclose  
the matter or injunction of the text  
(in order to make it our own)

*Context: Interpretation versus explanation.* Again, context is a fundamental condition to account for such variation: A ‘naïve’ reader of news reports or poems not only may have different knowledge than experts, but also different aims and interests – apart from investing different effort and time in their reading and understanding – variables of which some have been studied in cognitive and educational psychology. Generally speaking, more knowledge facilitates ‘better’ (more detailed, more complete, etc.) understanding – although experts are also known to read more sloppily (and hence may disregard more details) than non-experts, precisely because they think they already know about the things they are reading. Also, it is important to distinguish between processes of normal (everyday or expert) discourse *understanding*, as accounted for in terms of semantic and pragmatic mental models of readers, on the one hand, and scientific *explanations* of text or talk, for instance in terms of (psycho- or socio-) linguistic, cognitive, social, historical or cultural theories, on the other hand. The first are mental representations, the latter are scholarly discourses, featuring theoretical terms, analyses, argumentation, and so on.

*Beyond metaphor.* We have learned from cognitive linguistics and psychology that metaphor is a powerful conceptual instrument to understand and talk about abstract and complex states of affairs in everyday life. Also for this reason, even in the sciences, such as genetics, metaphors abound, especially in contexts of popularization (the genetic ‘code’ and its ‘letters’, etc.). Ricoeur – as well as Bell’s introduction – abounds with metaphors to describe the various stages of interpretation, as summarized before: *in front of the text, unfolding the text, ownership of the text*, etc. However, although such metaphors allow us to relate and hence to approximately understand abstract concepts in terms of more concrete, *embodied*, concepts, they are by no means to do the job of scholarly research. In the same way as the genetic ‘code’ must be spelled out in terms of molecular structure, the *analysis* of lay and scholarly interpretation of discourse needs to be specified in terms of situated discourse structures on the one hand, and the mental (and later maybe the neural) structures and processes on the other hand.

*Critical (ideological) analysis.* Critical discourse analysis should be based on systematic and explicit (theory-based) analysis of all relevant dimensions of situated text and

talk. Such an analysis may feature the detailed description of the sociocognitive nature of underlying ideologies (say of racism), how these influence socially shared attitudes (e.g. on immigration) which in turn may control the mental models of specific social events construed by the members of ideological groups, and finally the expressed (enacted, performed) structures of text and talk adapted to the communicative situation. Obviously, this is quite a different type of scholarly practice and discourse than mere *commentary* on ideological discourse – however brilliant it may be.

Indeed, many articles submitted to this journal do just that – merely comment on, or paraphrase discourse fragments – and are rejected for that reason. Hence, I don't stop to repeat that CDA itself is *not* a method of research, but a social movement of sociopolitically committed discourse analysts using many different methods of analysis, for example, in order to show how exactly discourse is involved in the (re)production of power abuse and its consequences for social inequality. Impressionistic approaches, also in CDA, are not only inadequate DA but also unable to realize their critical, sociopolitical aims.

### Note

This commentary does not feature the vast number of bibliographical references that would be required to sustain what is said in each paragraph. I may refer to my books and papers (partly accessible on my website [www.discourses.org](http://www.discourses.org)) for the detailed references on the topics dealt with in this article.

Teun A. van Dijk was Professor of discourse studies at the University of Amsterdam until 2004, and is at present Professor at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona. After earlier work on generative poetics, text grammar, and the psychology of text processing, his work since 1980 has taken a more critical perspective and deals with discursive racism, news in the press, ideology, knowledge and context. He is the author of several books in most of these areas, and he edited *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (4 vols, 1985), the introductory book *Discourse Studies* (2 vols, 1997; new one-volume edition, 2011) as well as the reader *Discourse Studies* (5 vols, 2007). He founded six international journals, *Poetics, Text* (now *Text & Talk*), *Discourse & Society*, *Discourse Studies*, *Discourse & Communication* and the internet journal in Spanish *Discurso & Sociedad* ([www.dissoc.org](http://www.dissoc.org)), of which he still edits the latter four. His last monographs in English are *Ideology* (1998), *Racism and Discourse in Spain and Latin America* (2005), *Discourse and Context* (2008), *Society and Discourse* (2009). His last edited books are *Racism at the Top* (2000, with Ruth Wodak), and *Racism and Discourse in Latin America* (2009). He is currently working on a new book on discourse and knowledge. Teun van Dijk, who holds two honorary doctorates, has lectured widely in many countries, especially in Latin America. With Adriana Bolivar he founded the Asociación Latinoamericana de Estudios del Discurso (ALED), in 1995. For a list of publications, recent articles, resources for discourse studies and other information, see his homepage: [www.discourses.org](http://www.discourses.org)., email address: [vandijk@discourses.org](mailto:vandijk@discourses.org).