

## REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**The Politics of Writing**

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*The Politics of Writing, Romy Clark and Roz Ivanic, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, 261 pages.*

Ideas about writing and learning to write change over time. Reforms in the teaching of writing show us this. Less visible perhaps are the differences across English-speaking cultures in ideas about language and writing. At times we may be more or less aware of difference as we question or adopt new products of US compositionism; examine — or fail to examine — their utility in Canadian settings; notice — or fail to notice — their introduction into our professional habitats. In this sector, Canada is in a trade-deficit position, but one we are accustomed to and may scarcely recognize. Romy Clark and Roz Ivanic's *The Politics of Writing*, a powerfully stated analysis of writing in UK contexts, academic and beyond, could move us to calculate our trade-dependence on US compositionism. And, in its bracing unfamiliarity, this book could be incentive to Canadian writing researchers to define more legibly our local principles and policies.

In Clark and Ivanic's intellectual universe, reasoning about the teaching of writing occupies a position different from that occupied by North American "composition", with its longstanding if debatable adjacencies to English departments and literary studies. Clark and Ivanic's reasoning about writing is situated between, on the one hand, linguistics — sociolinguistics (as represented by say James Milroy and Lesley Milroy, and as reconceived by Deborah Cameron) and systemic-functional linguistics — and, on the other hand, Marxist and neo-Marxist social theory — Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, with contributions from Pierre Bourdieu (a figure now common in North American discussions of writing). Beyond this intellectual axis, and equally influential in their proposals, are salient conditions of British political culture: the expression of neo-conservative principles in the National Curriculum; the role of the British press in

configuring class interests. From these coordinates of intellectual and political culture issue claims about language and writing which in some ways resemble those we are used to but in other ways are both invigoratingly foreign and promising for what they could bring to Canadian research in writing. Their conceptualization of literacy differs in some particulars from what is customary in North America, these particulars supporting a bold frame for reasoning about writing. In this account, social constructionist views activate a broad, reformist political project which interprets individual agency through an unforgiving, tough-minded class analysis. The kind of liberal-bourgeois sensibilities that cling to US compositionism are here expunged.

Inspired by their colleague Norman Fairclough, and by Gramsci and Hall, Clark and Ivanic's analysis is bravely designed. They approach the writer through two commanding institutions of civil society: the *press* and *schooling*. The *press*, they argue, produces the central figures that count as common sense. Most strikingly, they suggest that the press manages the range of meanings available in the culture and calibrates their privilege (pp.21 and 26) to the point where "anybody who writes anything" will be dealing in these materials, to some degree. *Schooling*, they argue, in its patterns of school-leaving and attainment, reproduces the social order. While others say as much, Clark and Ivanic's contribution is to insist that "language and language/literacy education is...the prime carrier of the dominant ideologies and cultural values in which school practices are consciously or unconsciously embedded" (p.49). Their analysis brings us to a threshold from which we can glimpse a dismal but difficult to deny circumstance: whether in traditional or updated classrooms, English studies can have baleful effects on all but the minority of students. Even those who go on to accomplishments in other disciplines seem mostly relieved that they have escaped the regime of the English classroom, while those who go other ways acquire, along with their working literacy, a life-long capacity to stigmatize their own uses of language.

Proportionate to this intrepid focus on the *politics* of writing through the binocular of the press and schooling, the conclusion of this book proposes radical structural reform of the print media and reforms of school culture. At first glance, the reforms to schooling may seem more achievable than those which would upset the dominances of the publishing industries: schooling, in Clark and Ivanic's vision of change, would adopt some practices North Americans will readily recognise — "writing across the curriculum" principles, improvement in feedback and evaluation techniques — and some which should be welcome here — instruction in "Critical Language Awareness", and suspicion of "competency" models of learning, in particular. But some of these reforms to schooling would tackle attitudes towards

language which, although perverse and even “unjust”, are nevertheless so deep-rooted in western, English-speaking cultures — as the nature of language itself colludes with hegemonic interests — that they seem to be as hardy as drug-resistant viruses.

Between their embracing social analysis and their proposals for reform, Clark and Ivanic offer a theory of “discourse types” which, on the one hand, cultivates a particular view of language and, on the other hand, summons a particular view of agency and identity. These views, we will see, are politically reciprocal.

Lurking in the neighbourhood of Clark and Ivanic’s work are *typologists*, those who propose a taxonomy of text types. Clark and Ivanic don’t identify these people, but meeting and resisting them at every turn, they describe them enough for me to infer that they are the genre theorists of what we call (from this distance) the “Sidney school” — educationists like J. R. Martin who suggest a handful of superordinate genres (“recount”, “report”, “argument”...), describe them with instruments of systemic-functional linguistics, and provide thereby means for teachers to extrapolate instructional schemes. For several reasons, Clark and Ivanic reject “genre” as an “overarching” term (p.14), preferring “discourse types”. First, they find in (what seems to be) Australian genre theory an undesirable outcome of functionalist views of language: namely, the sense that “linguistic norms and conventions are the inevitable product of the purposes that they serve” (p.14), and that there can be discovered a “one-to-one relationship between types of context and types of writing” (p.71). Second, and in turn, the typological motives which derive from functionalist views suggest “unitary” (p.13) profiles of genres and defy what Clark and Ivanic see as the actual nature of genres: although susceptible to orders of privilege and dominance, genres are “not singular and set in stone, but heterogeneous and open to contestation.... Every instance...contributes to the possibilities of new genres, or generic variations emerging” (p.14). Finally, in schemes which develop from functional/typological principles, the term “genre” is vulnerable to “simplistic” (p.15) uses in educational settings, “superficial” analyses (p.53) which veer towards formalism. Clark and Ivanic’s objections to genre taxonomies are both theoretical and practical.

North American compositionists might recognise some of these sentiments, especially the suspicions of formalism. But their outcome — or origin — in ideas of individual agency will be less familiar. In place of liberal notions of “resistance” (such as those which Susan Peck MacDonald criticizes in *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1994), Clark and Ivanic present more challenging notions, ones which follow from concepts of hegemony and analyses of class.

For Clark and Ivanic, every instance of social action is “unique” (p.110), owing

to individuals' life histories — but unique only at the level of “micro-purposes”. In participating in some activity informed by the precedents of a genre, writers resort to “abstract” (pp.139 to 140) — rather than “concrete” — resources, to “available” rather than “invented” patterns, these resources being “in the air” (p.138). Summoning these available resources, writers are prone to the exigencies of prestige, “likely to be positioned into reproducing” dominant interests (p.13). It may seem at first that writers are endowed with unique circumstances and purposes only to donate them to larger, dominant systems (no sooner do people experience or enact individual motivations than these are confiscated by the “macro-purposes” of the culture). But the theory of text types redeems subjectivities from this indentured position, for discourse types are *not unitary*, but outcomes of struggle and contestable: “Writers may be seduced into drawing on the dominant order, but they have the option, in principle, to do otherwise” (p.13). These options, however, are not those assigned to the writers imagined by North American compositionists. Writers in this social world don't resist in a spirit of individual creativity, solo and unprecedented, but, instead, by invoking or participating in non-dominant orders of discourse. Like the prestige forms, these orders are also “templates” (p.13), available products of the ambient culture. This account of agency seems to me realistic and useful.

Having secured this basis for understanding writers' social action, Clark and Ivancic take their theory of discourse types to the level of text features. Denying functionalist views, they insist on the ideological dimension of features. For example, long noun phrases like the ones Halliday and Martin describe in *Writing Science*, 1993<sup>1</sup> as functional to scientific disciplines Clark and Ivancic see as *not* “essential” (p.53) to academic writing, as only a “superficial veneer”. The veneer obscures core purposes: “Learners are rewarded for their ability to ape the conventions, rather than for engaging in the underlying purpose for writing” (p.53). Yet, at the same time as they reject functionalist views of features and (convincingly) argue that there is no “one-to-one” correlation (p.139) between feature and function, their ideological interpretation of features has its own “one-to-one” tendency. For example, the use of “I” in academic writing is repeatedly interpreted as an occasion for writers to seize or forego authority: when a student in Accounting and Finance chooses to use “I” when s/he refers to her/his own ideas”, the writer is “making a statement about the right of students to have opinions of their own; s/he is also breaking a dominant convention in many disciplines that says that academic writing should be ‘objective’...” (p.84). By choosing not to use a passive, the writer takes “responsibility” (p.96); citation of other writers amounts to “hiding” (p.169). Most

1 Clark and Ivancic do not identify this volume: I am inferring that they have something like this in mind.

demonstrations of these features come from passages of student writing, some accompanied by brief life-histories of the students themselves. These histories, however, seem to me not sufficient context for interpretation of isolated features. I would look to see the interpretation substantiated by corpus study, or by pragmatic analysis, or by account of the sociohistorical moment in the life of a genre, or by all three lines of inquiry. (Then I might not want to ask why, for example, we have to interpret citation as “hiding” rather than an invitation to guest speakers to resume the conversation of the discipline, and an opportunity for the writer to join that conversation.) One might reckon that even as they disavow taxonomies of genres and registers, and advance ideology over function, Clark and Ivanic still follow the trajectories of systemic-functional linguistics: moving from the broad prospect of the social semiotics of language to systemic analysis of features, they leave unexamined the middle ground — where resemblances and regularities congregate across instances, re-form and transform in commerce with one another. Like some applications of systemic-functional linguistics, and Critical Discourse Analysis, they go on hunches, and refer to stereotypes. North American new-rhetorical genre theory (of which Clark and Ivanic seem unaware), with its research focus on sites of literacy, has the capacity to explore this middle ground. At the same time, the kind of linguistic know-how, semiotic sensitivity and political realism which Clark and Ivanic exercise, could improve North American genre theory’s approach to language itself.

More than once while reading this book I wanted to ask about the plan for contesting dominant conventions: what would this look like? What are readers’ roles in this project? What is their incentive to participate? Yet, while I still think that Clark and Ivanic neglect reception, and at times seemed to be going after a kind of social expressivism, I eventually realised that I was reading an instance of contestation. And my role as a reader came easily to me as I found *The Politics of Writing* refusing some features of scholarly writing and developing alternatives. The authors call themselves “Romy and Roz”, for example; they compose short professional biographies of themselves, telling about the work histories and research projects which have led them to the positions they take; they advance many strong claims, political assertive ones, unapologetically projected through “we suggest”. At the beginning of their chapter on the press and schooling, they announce that they couldn’t agree on “whether liberal democracy and free market economy are or are not in the interests of the majority of people” — so Romy wrote most of the chapter. The book itself demonstrates one of its central claims — that the instance contributes to the type, and that the contribution can be strategic. I prize the book for this aspect of its character, for its scrupulous examination of the terms which

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constitute views of writing (“voice” and “purpose”, for example, as well as “genre” and “context”) and for its worldly scholarship. I also value it for the opportunity it gives us to recognise our own sociohistorical position, our own Canadian “politics” of writing, agency and orders of social action.