

## REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Analyzing Everyday Texts: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Perspectives**

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*Glenn F. Stillar, Analyzing Everyday Texts: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Perspectives, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1998. 199 pages.*

In spite of its title, this book emphasizes social perspectives as seen largely through the writings of Kenneth Burke and Pierre Bourdieu, and the social semiotic elements of the systemic-functional grammar of Michael Halliday and his followers. There is some discussion of lexical and textual connection, and Burke's approach to rhetoric does include the purpose-means (or "instrument") relation of meaning; but Stillar's emphasis on social relations and interaction means that central concepts of discourse structure and rhetorical patterns are omitted or glossed over. This book will be of interest to those seeking to develop their understanding of how texts might establish or reinforce social relationships between reader and writer. However, those more interested in textual connectedness, structures, and meanings will find the book disappointing.

True, the "... book explores the discursal, rhetorical, and social meanings of 'everyday' written texts ..." (p.1). But discourse is defined as "... an integral part of the goings-on that make up social life ..." (p.5), reflecting and constructing the social (p.6), and "... as a medium and an outcome of social practice" (p.6). The principle function of rhetoric is seen as "... a symbolic means of inducing co-operation in beings ..." (p.5 and Burke 1969). That is, Stillar's account is really an exploration of discourse as it relates to social life and social practice, rhetoric in terms of social co-operation, and social perspectives. While such an emphasis is certainly worthwhile, it is a pity that the work is presented as if it deals substantively with discourse and rhetoric as well as social factors. The original title, *The Rhetoric of Discourse as Social*

*Practice*, is more appropriate than the one chosen. Stillar's aim of "bringing together rhetorical, social and discursal theory" has been achieved only by largely ignoring principles of discourse and rhetoric and conflating them with social perspectives.

The introductory chapter, on "Everyday Texts," presents the author's aims well, but provides no details or discussion of other work on the subject. Here and throughout the book, Stillar stays rigidly within the writings of Halliday, Burke, and Bourdieu (and to a lesser extent Giddens), not mentioning other approaches that would have considerably enriched the analysis of his texts. Students who are unfamiliar with, for example, patterns of lexis, rhetorical structure theory, semantic relations and propositions, and problem-solution analysis are not informed of the numerous and extensive analyses of everyday texts (from formal writing to casual conversation) that have been based on these subjects. Readers are therefore not enabled or encouraged to relate the teachings in this book to the wider scholarly work in the discourse and rhetoric of everyday texts.

For the discourse component of analysis, Chapter 2 provides a useful summary of the main features of the systemic-functional approach to language analysis based on Halliday's ideational, textual, and interpersonal metafunctions of language. While the ideational function is adequately described in the Hallidayian terms of actional, mental and ideational processes (plus circumstantial conditions), this system proves here, as with other systemic-functional analyses, to be a weak model for understanding the "content" of the message as representing a part of the real world. The lexical part of cohesion is briefly described here, but is poorly applied to the texts, and the account of clause-connecting devices (the heart of rhetorical structures) does not develop the incomplete Hallidayian/Martin description of "causal" connection. For example, although Stillar later discusses at length the part of Burke's system that describes the purpose-means (or instrument) relation, he fails to distinguish clearly between impersonal cause-effect connections, and basis-assessment pairs of human (or at least animate) judgment and evidence — even though these meanings are prominent in the examples he analyzes.

But Stillar's account of Halliday's interpersonal function is quite refreshing, drawing as it does from other sources (such as Michael Gregory's communication linguistics, and Jay Lemke's views on interpersonal meaning in society) to expand the initial scope of the concept. Stillar also notes how the traditional Hallidayian view of modals as indicators of the interpersonal function fails to recognize the role of modals as indicators of levels of doubt and possibility; and he gives a helpful summary of the discussion in the *Collins Cobuild English Grammar* (1990) both for this and the roles

of adjectives. Discussion of Halliday's later notion of grammatical metaphor is unfortunately absent from this chapter; it would have helped to explain parts of texts analyzed later.

Chapter 3 provides an account of Burke's system of grammatical, rhetorical, and logological aspects of the social and functional roles of text. This is Stillar's "rhetorical" element of textual analysis. As Stillar notes, Burke's "grammar" is not really a grammar at all, but deals primarily with the rhetorical pattern of act-agent-scene-agency-purpose drawn from their uses in drama. Stillar does not extend this pattern into other relations (or "ratios" as Burke calls them) dealing with cause-consequence, cause-effect, basis-assessment, and related concepts of "solutionhood" and "enablement," for example, in rhetorical structure theory and other approaches. There is also no account of how these relations occur in complex combinations and at different levels of text — from within the nominal group and clause to the meta-structures of large documents.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Stillar's description of Burke's rhetoric deals more with interpersonal relations, specifically those involved with differences between, and consubstantiality of, individuals. Stillar's account of Burke's system of logology (words about words) and his detailed analysis of a poem by Burke are too vague, general, and esoteric to be applied directly to textual analysis, and Stillar makes little real attempt to do so. In addition, Burke's approach to negation as solely hortatory (Thou shalt not ...) shows the weakness of his over-reliance on religious genres of language use, and the discussion of hierarchies stresses those in society rather than levels of rhetorical aims in a document. The main weakness of Stillar's total dependence on Burke for his rhetorical resources, though, is what it does *not* provide: a comprehensive account of meanings, systems, structures, and strategies for achieving rhetorical aims in everyday texts.

Chapter 4, apart from a brief mention of Giddens' "duality of structure," is an uncritical summary of Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as social behaviour and linguistic practice. These are Stillar's social theory resources. Bourdieu's theory seeks to explain how individuals and groups are predisposed, largely through cultural/societal influences, with certain preferences and dispositions. Using this approach, we might hope to predict the actions, feelings, and motives of individuals and groups in relations with other groups (e.g., students and their professors). The theory also involves individual "taste" and how well individuals conform to the "field," or the way society might expect us to behave.

Bourdieu's theory is expanded using a subset of *habitus*: "linguistic *habitus*," involving an individual's linguistic predispositions, tastes and behaviour. This is vaguely described as a combination of personal style, text evaluation dispositions,

and symbolic “power” and “capital” in a given “market,” with the claim that:

... what makes symbolic capital (including linguistic capital) powerful is that it is recognized as arbitrary; that is, it is recognized as not being the product of social agents’ habitus in relation to a particular field. (p. 104)

More-clearly defined concepts are needed to provide a sound basis in social theory for the analysis of texts.

Stillar puts his theoretical principles to the test by analyzing three texts in Chapter 5. His first example, an advertisement for a Saturn car, is an ideal type of text to use as the basis for the socially driven emphasis explained earlier in the book, as it provides little real detail about the car. It relies instead on a combination of references and allusions to racial diversity, perseverance, intelligence, success, emotional attraction, simplicity, decisiveness, and personal appeal to attract potential buyers. However, although some of the above features are discussed, there is no mention of the overall structure of the text, the exemplification, the metaphors, the comparisons, the minor sentences, the interesting use of conjunctions, the powerful negations, the lexical connections, the writer’s assessments, the informal signals, or the basis-assessment binary pairs. That is, Stillar’s discussion of the text is a general interpretation of the social factors that motivated the text, not an analysis of the text itself.

The second example, a series of advice booklets by the Royal Bank of Canada, is even more problematic. The first subtext, on spending habits, includes many important features of meaning and structure (several cause-effect and basis-assessment relations, need-fulfillment, enablement, problem-solution, and negation-correction) that are not discussed in the chapter and not included in the theoretical framework offered. In addition, the five introductory letters cited all indicate the clear structural pattern of problem-solution-evaluation since the advice booklets are introduced as solutions to customers’ need to know and understand the money matters involved. Yet Stillar’s theoretical account provides no basis for identifying and understanding this dominant overall rhetorical/informational pattern and the related linguistic signalling.

For the third text, an individual’s speech-pathology progress report, Stillar recognizes the overall report as involving a defined “problem,” but has no resources to develop the analysis beyond that. He also identifies the structure of each goal-discussion pair in the report as (in Burkean terms) *purpose-act ratios*, but offers no analysis of the complex meanings and relations within the acts. These include attempted solutions to the diagnosed problem, the means of implementing these attempts, their assessments (some with basis), enablements, concessions and comparisons. Several interesting lists of lexical choices are given for many identifications, actions, prob-

lems, solutions, and evaluations. What a pity these are only related to social factors and not the vital meanings and structures involved with the diagnosis, needs analysis, improvement efforts and assessments — the substantive concepts that lie at the heart of these texts.

The final chapter makes the claim that the three theoretical systems described in Chapters 2–4 together provide a more powerful analytical resource than the resources they offer as individual systems. While that is undoubtedly true, the combined use of all three systems described still falls far short of the comprehensive system of analysis claimed for the book.

Stillar's approach in *Analyzing Everyday Texts* is more aligned with literary interpretation than language analysis. The former approach allows assessments of the roles, attitudes, feelings, and relationships of and between the writer and readers. The latter approach allows a more objective description and explanation of meanings, structures, connecting devices, and prominent features of the text itself. This book seeks to place social perspectives as the central method for interpreting texts, a method that may have value for texts, such as consumer advertising, where the medium (as well as image, personal preference, group identity, and other social factors) is the message. For other texts, however, Stillar's theoretical framework fails to provide the necessary resources to explain the more substantive elements of the message and the way it is organized and expressed.

In this book, Stillar does not provide “... a comprehensive and well-illustrated framework for the analysis of everyday texts ...” (back cover) although he does raise awareness of the need for social factors to be included as part of such a framework. He also presents what could be some of the elements for the “social perspective” component of a comprehensive approach to the analysis of everyday texts. Rather than ignoring earlier methods and seeking to replace them with a totally new system heavily skewed towards social factors, he might have provided a greater contribution by showing how elements of social perspective might supplement, and perhaps complement, approaches that explain meanings and structures at all levels of text.

What this book shows us is that, in any meaningful analysis of most texts, we cannot ignore the overall meanings, structures, and logical relations. Perhaps we have also learned that, for some texts, we cannot ignore the social implications either.