I, You, and It

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Consider, if you will, those primary moments of experience that are necessarily the raw stuff of all discourse. Let us suppose, for example, that I am sitting in a public cafeteria eating lunch. People are arriving and departing, passing through the line, choosing tables, socializing. I am bombarded with smells of food, the sounds of chatter and clatter, the sights of the counter, the tables, the clothing, the faces, the gesticulations and bending of elbows. But I am not just an observer; I am eating and perhaps socializing as well. A lot is going on within me—the tasting and ingesting of the food, reactions to what I observe, emotions about other people. I am registering all these inner and outer stimuli. My perceptual apparatus is recording these moments of raw experience, not in words but in some code of its own that leads to words. This apparatus is somewhat unique to me in the way it selects and ignores stimuli and in the way it immediately connects them with old stimuli and previously formed conceptions. It is difficult to separate this sensory recording from the constant stream of thoughts that is going on simultaneously and parallel to the sensory record but may often depart from it. This verbal stream is the first level of discourse to be considered. The subject is what is happening now, and the audience is oneself.

Suppose next that I tell the cafeteria experience to a friend sometime later in conversation. For what reason am I telling him? Would I tell it differently to someone else? Would I tell it differently to the same person at another time and in different circumstances? These are not rhetorical questions but questions about rhetoric. The fact that my account is an unrehearsed, face-to-face vocalization, uttered to this person for this reason at this time and place and in these circumstances determines to an enormous degree not only the overall way in which I abstract certain features of the ongoing panorama of the cafeteria scene but also much of the way I choose words, construct sentences, and organize parts. Compare this discourse with the third stage, when my audience is no longer face to face with me, but is farther removed in time and space so that I have to write a letter or memo to him. Informal writing is usually still rather spontaneous, directed at an audience known to the writer, and reflects the transient mood and circumstances in which the writing occurs. Feedback and audience influence, however, are delayed and weakened. Written discourse must replace or compensate for the loss of vocal characteristics and all physical expressiveness of gesture, tone, and manner. Compare in turn now the changes that must occur all down the line when I write about this cafeteria experience in a discourse destined for publication and distribution to a mass, anonymous audience of present and perhaps unborn people. I cannot allude to things and ideas that only my friends know about. I must use a vocabulary, style, logic, and rhetoric that anybody in that mass audience can understand and respond to. I must name and organize what happened during those moments in the cafeteria that day in such a way that this mythical average reader can relate what I say to some primary moments of experience of his own. In other words, whether this published discourse based on the cafeteria luncheon comes out as a fragment
of autobiography, a short story, a humorous descriptive essay, or a serious theoretical essay about people’s behavior in public places, certain necessities frame the discourse and determine a lot of its qualities before the writer begins to exercise his personal options.

These four stages of discourse—inner verbalization, outer vocalization, correspondence, and formal writing—are of course only the major markers of a continuum that could be much more finely calibrated. This continuum is formed simply by increasing the distance, in all senses, between speaker and audience. The audience is, first, the speaker himself, then another person standing before him, then someone in another time and place but having some personal relation to the speaker, then, lastly, an unknown mass extended over time and space. The activity necessarily changes from thinking to speaking to writing to publishing. (Thinking as inner speech is at least as old as Bergson and William James and as new as Piaget and Vygotsky.) For me no discussion of language, rhetoric, and composition is meaningful except in this context, for there is no speech without a speaker in some relation to a spoken-to and a spoken-about.

Starting with our cafeteria scene again, I would like to trace it as a subject that may be abstracted to any level I would wish. Please understand that by “subject” I mean some primary moments of experience regardless of how dimly they may appear in the discourse. There are four stages in the processing of raw phenomena by the human symbolic apparatus, although, again, one may recognize many gradations in between. This continuum can best be represented by verb tenses, which indicate when events occurred in relation to when the speaker is speaking of them. Suppose I represent the cafeteria scene first as what is happening, which would be the lowest level of verbal abstraction of reality: the order and organization of events would correspond most closely to phenomenal reality, and my verbalization of them would be the most immediate and unpondered that is possible. That is, my symbolic representation in this case would entail the least processing of matter by mind. If next I treat the events at the cafeteria as what happened, the subject will necessarily partake a little more of my mind and a little less of the original matter. Although the order of events will still be chronological, it is now my memory and not my perceptual apparatus that is doing the selecting. Some things will stick in my mind and some will not, and some things I will choose to retain or reject, depending on which features of this scene and action I wish to bring out. Of the details selected, some I will dwell upon and some I will subordinate considerably. Ideas are mixed with material from the very beginning, but the recollection of a drama—a narrative, that is—inevitably entails more introduction of ideas because this is inherent in the very process of selecting, summarizing, and emphasizing, even if the speaker refrains from commenting directly on the events.

Suppose next that I speak of my cafeteria experience as what happens. Obviously, if we consider it for a moment, the difference between what happened and what happens is not truly a time difference, or at least we must realize that what we are calling a time difference is actually a difference in the level to which I choose to abstract some primary moments of experience. I am now treating my once-upon-a-time interlude at the cafeteria as something that recurs. I have jumped suddenly, it seems, from narrative to generalization. Actually, as we have said, ideas creep in long before this but are hidden in the processing. Now they must be more explicit, for only by renaming the experience and comparing it with other experiences can I present it as what happens. No primary moments of experience recur. What we mean is that we as observers see similari-
ties in different experiences. Only the human mind, capable of sorting and classifying reality, can do this. What I do, for example, is make an analogy between something in the cafeteria experience and something I singled out of a number of other experiences. I summarize a lot of little formless dramas into pointed narratives and then I put these narratives into some classes, which I and others before me have created. In this third stage of processing, then, the cafeteria scene will become a mere example, among several others, of some general statement such as “The food you get in restaurants is not as good as what you get at home,” or “People don’t like me,” or “Americans do not socialize as readily with strangers in public places as Italians do,” or “The arrivals and departures within a continuous group create changes in excitation level comparable to the raising and lowering of electric potential in variously stimulated sensory receptors.” It is apparent that these sample generalizations could all have contained the cafeteria experience as an example but vary a great deal in their abstractness, their range of applicability, their objectivity or universal truth value, and their originality.

The transition from a chronological to an analogical discourse is of enormous importance in teaching. The student must forsake the given order of time and replace it with an order of ideas. To do this he must summarize drastically the original primary moments of experience, find classes of inclusion and exclusion, and rename the moments so that it becomes clear how they are alike or different. Most students fail to create original and interesting classes because they are unwittingly encouraged to borrow their generalizations from old slogans, wise saws, reference books, and teachers’ essay questions, instead of having to forge them from their own experience. Many students leave out the illustrations completely and offer only their apparently sourceless opinions. Others, reluctant to leave the haven of narrative, tell several anecdotes and never show how they are related. But these are failures of teachers, not of students. Proper writing assignments can lead the students to good generalizations.

In what I will call the last stage of symbolizing a subject, you may wonder why I still refer to the cafeteria, since none of that experience appears any longer in the discourse, which is now a highly theoretical essay. That is deceptive; it is behind the discourse, buried in the processing and so combined with other experiences, and so renamed, that we do not recognize it any more. The “subject” seems to be a theory, some combining and developing of generalizations. This stage is telling what will, may, or could happen. Some general assertions previously arrived at by analogical thinking are now plugged into each other in various ways according to the rules of formal logic. Suppose we take some generalizations about the behavior of Americans and the behavior of Italians and the behavior of South Sea islanders and we transform and combine these statements in such a way as to come out with an anthropological conclusion that was not evident in any of the original moments of experience nor even in the generalizations about them. It took manipulations of logic to show the implication of the earlier statements. To go beyond this stage is to enter the realm of mathematical equations. What will, may, or could happen is a high-level inference entailing tautology, verbal equations. My own essay is an example of stage-four abstraction. I am setting up a series of equations among “levels of abstraction,” “distance between speaker, listener, and subject,” verb tenses, human faculties, and kinds of logic. I will then conclude a theory about composition curriculum by combining generalizations about what happens in discourse with what happens in
the learning process of people. What enables me to do this is that something fundamental to the operation of our nervous system underlies all these man-made conceptions.

I have traced separately, and grossly, two abstractive progressions—one in which the speaker’s audience becomes more remote and diffused over time and space, and another in which the speaker’s subject becomes less and less matter and more and more idea. Each relation—and of course the two must be taken together—entails certain necessities, and shifts in these relations entail changes all down the line, from the organization of the whole discourse to individual word choice. As we move through the progressions, perception gives way to memory and memory to ratiocination; chronology gives way to analogy and analogy to tautology. But each faculty and kind of logic depends on the one before. In view of what we know now about abstractive processes and the cognitive and verbal growth of children, this order seems pedagogically sound to me. In other words, the necessities inherent in devising a rhetoric for an increasingly remote audience and in abstracting moments of experience to higher and higher symbolic levels are precisely the limitations which should shape our writing assignments.

According to Piaget, and Vygotsky agrees with him, the early egocentric speech of children becomes gradually “socialized” and adapts itself to other people. At the same time his mental outlook decenters; that is, he gradually yields up his initial, emotionally preferred vantage point, and expands his perspective so as to include many other points of view. Of course, both these kinds of growth never really stop. The movement is from self to world, from a point to an area, from a private world of egocentric chatter to a public universe of discourse. Cognitively, the young person passes through, according to Jerome Bruner, three phases—the enactive, the iconic, and the symbolic. First he knows things by manipulating them with his hands, then he begins to classify and interpret the world by means of image summaries, and finally he can carry out logical operations in his head modeled on his earlier physical manipulations. Most teachers have always known that in some way the child should move from the concrete to the abstract, but the whole notion of an abstraction ladder has never been clear and still requires more study. I have found the communication engineers’ definition of coding to be very helpful in all this: Coding is the substitution of one set of events for another. What I call the processing of matter by mind is in fact the substitution of inner events for outer events. These inner events are neural, and we don’t yet know very much about them. We can be sure, however, that as the child’s nervous system develops, these neural operations become more complicated. A series of writing assignments is a series of thinking assignments and therefore a sequence of internal operations. All stages of a developmental sequence are crucial and none can be left out. Teachers have got to become more sophisticated about this sequence and more aware of the effects in the student of his trying to do what we ask.

As a model for a composition course, imagine the trinity of discourse—first, second, and third persons—to be a single circle that separates into three overlapping circles which move out until they merely touch. The discourse unity of somebody talking to somebody else about something is what we must never lose, but we can create phases, not by decomposing composition into analytical elements but by gradually pushing the persons apart. Language and rhetoric are variable factors of each other and of shifting relations among persons. We abstract not only from something but for someone. Rhetoric, on the other hand,
is to some extent dictated by the abstraction level we have chosen; in drama and narrative one appeals mainly by concrete recognitions, and in exposition and argumentation mainly by one's classes and logical justice. So the rationale of our composition course lies in some crossing of the two progressions I have sketched. This is not only possible but will spiral the curriculum. For example, we ask the student to tell what happened in four different rhetorics—to himself as he spontaneously recalls a memory, to a friend face to face, to someone he knows in a letter, and to the world at large in formal writing. Generalizations and theories can be dealt with first in interior monologues, then in dialogues, in letters and diaries, and only at the end in essays. The student is never assigned a subject, only a form, and the forms are ordered according to the preceding ideas. Thus, the assignments are structural and sequential.

Specifically, I would have the student write in this order: all kinds of real and invented interior monologues, dramatic monologues, dialogues, plays, letters, diaries, fragments of autobiography, eyewitness accounts, reporters-at-large (modeled on those in the New Yorker), case studies, first and third person fiction, essays of generalization and essays of logical argumentation. Many teachers may feel that such a program slight the expository in favor of so-called personal or creative writing. In the first place, one doesn't learn exposition just by writing it all the time. An enormous amount of other learning must take place before one can write worthwhile essays of ideas; that is in the nature of the whole abstraction process. All writing teaches exposition. Furthermore, I cannot conceive a kind of discourse which does not contain ideas; even in concrete description, contrasts, similarities, and notions of causality and progression are strongly implicit. Monologues, dialogues, letters, diaries, and narratives may either contain explicit ideas or be shaped by ideas, What do we mean by a pointed narrative? What are Socratic dialogues about? And why do we have students digging for meaning in literary works of imagination if they are not full of ideas? The issue is not idea writing versus other kinds of writing but rather which form the ideas are presented in. All modes must be taught. The panic to teach exposition is partly responsible for its being taught so badly. Teachers do not feel they can take the time to let a student abstract from the ground up. But if they do not, he will never learn to write exposition.

There are several corollaries of the program I am proposing. Since it attempts to exercise the student in all possible relations that might obtain between him and an audience and a subject, one corollary is that he not be allowed to get stuck with one audience or at one range of the abstractive spectrum. It is essential that he address someone besides the English teacher and get some kind of feedback other than red marks. As one solution, I suggest that he be accustomed to write to the whole class as being the nearest thing to a contemporary world at large. Compositions should be read in class, and out of class, reacted to and discussed. One must know the effects of one's rhetoric on someone who does not give grades and does not stand as an authority figure. I suggest also the performance and publication of student works as frequently as possible. Monologues, dialogues, letters, and diaries give the student the opportunity both to address a real or invented person outside the classroom and to adopt a voice not his own.

What most frequently freezes the student at one end of the abstractive spectrum is too much writing about reading. Perhaps because of the great influence of college essay exams and of literary exegesis, composition courses often boil down to "how to write about books."
This is a narrow notion of exposition. Abstracting about someone else's already high abstraction, whether it be a book or a teacher's essay question, means that certain essential issues of choice about selecting and treating material and creating classes are never permitted to come up for the student. When I assign a topic such as "loyalty" or "Irony in A. E. Housman," all I am asking the student to do is to find illustrations for my classifications. By doing half of his work for him, I am impoverishing his education. Rather than assign literary exegesis, I would have him write in the forms he reads. As practitioner he will naturally be a better literary critic than a student who only analyzes. Rather than assign book reports and essays on books, I would encourage the student to incorporate into his essays of generalization illustrations and ideas drawn from his reading and to mix these with his own experiences and observations; in other words, get him to create the classes into which he can fit people and actions drawn from both books and life. There is a real place for reading in a composition course, not as subject matter to write about but as a source of experience and as a repertory of discourse. After all, reading provides some excellent primary moments of experience.

From the perceptual level on up the student should be forced in effect to confront all the right issues of choice. Only in this way will he develop the faculties necessary to produce the ideas of exposition. On the same grounds, I am leary of asking the student to read about writing. I have spent a lot of time unteaching the dicta of composition texts and manuals of advice. Trial and error best develops judgment and taste, if this trial and error process is keyed in with the student's learning schedule. Explanations and definitions of good style, technique, and rhetoric create more problems than they solve. The issue here is not only one of cognitive development but of psychological independence. We must give students an emotional mandate to play the symbolic scale, to find subjects and shape them, to invent ways to act upon others, and to discover their own voice.

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An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Writings on English Prose Style

JAMES R. BENNETT

GENERAL*

Assessed by Williamson in The Senecan Amble, p. 39.

Chapter IV, "English Prose Tradition," depletes the loss of "aesthetic" style and the ascendancy of the scientific "plain" style; surveys "aesthetic" stylists during the last three centuries.

* I am indebted to the assistance of Professor Marjorie Ryan in the collection of titles for this bibliography.