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# **THE LANGUAGE of INTERPRETATION:**

**PATTERNS of DISCOURSE in  
DISCUSSIONS of LITERATURE**

**JAMES D. MARSHALL,  
PETER SMAGORINSKY, and MICHAEL W. SMITH**

# The Language of Interpretation

Patterns of Discourse  
in Discussions of Literature

James D. Marshall

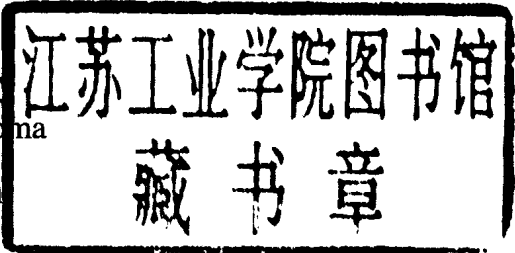
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# 1 Introduction

A teacher and her ninth-grade students have for several days been discussing Dickens's *Great Expectations*. The discussion has been slow and sometimes tedious; the students are quite clearly bored. Hoping to find a new way to approach the discussion, the teacher takes a moment to ask her students how they feel about the way things have been going:

*Teacher:* . . . So let's take a moment to talk about how our discussions have been working lately.

*Terry:* I don't know how anybody else feels, but I do not like picking apart a book. We could spend an entire period on just one page. It just makes the book a lot less enjoyable.

*Jenny:* Yeah, this isn't a lab or something.

*Teacher:* Putting it under the microscope.

*Brian:* Yeah, that's true, because it gets sort of boring after a while. I read it and I understand it and then, but why do we have to go over it?

*Teacher:* All right, some of you understand and want to get on with it and others find the discussion helps in understanding. Tony, something you want to add?

*Tony:* I just don't care for the book. I think it's boring.

*Teacher:* You're not pleased with the book.

*Tony:* And doing it over and over and over again doesn't help.

*Teacher:* That's enough. All right. I hear you, and we'll see what we can do about it. But for today, let's go on precisely the way we were. . . .

In many ways the studies we report in this book are an attempt to understand what has happened in this brief classroom episode. Why have the discussions so far taken the particular shape they have? Why do the students find them boring? Why, in spite of everyone's frustration, does the teacher decide to go on "precisely the way we were"? What other ways of proceeding might be available to her?

To explore these questions, we undertook a series of studies examining the ways in which people talk about literature in a variety of contexts. Our purpose in this book is to describe as fully as we can how discussions of literature proceed, to explore the intentions and expectations of those who participate in such discussions, and to use our analyses as the basis of a consideration of what constitutes effective instruction. We hope that our

efforts will provoke conversations among teachers as they reflect upon their practice and that they will provide one point of departure for future study of the teaching and learning of literature. Although we focus primarily on the kinds of discussions that take place in school, we are interested as well in talk about literature that takes place outside the classroom and, more generally, in how talk about literature helps shape participants' response to the texts that they read.

A full-scale study of the language that readers use to discuss literature seems especially relevant now as work in both reading and literary theory has converged on the concept of "constructive processes" in describing the act of reading. Though drawing from a variety of theoretical perspectives, this research has explained the process of reading as a transaction between the language on the page and the purposes, expectations, and prior knowledge of the reader. Given this model, it seems important to ask if and how *discussions* of literature help shape reader-text transactions by fostering specific ways of talking and thinking about texts. As Bruner and Olson (1980) have argued, knowledge is acquired through activity; in their aphorism, by sitting on chairs, we learn both about "chairs" and about "sitting." By the same token, talking about literature may provide readers with knowledge about literature. But it will also provide knowledge about the conventional ways of talking about literature: the language, questions, and responses that are thought to be appropriate in given contexts and those that are thought to be less so. Discussions of literature, in other words, may constitute a kind of tacit curriculum in conventional modes of literary knowledge—a curriculum about which we know very little.

## **Literature and Schooling**

The study of literature in school has from the start been marked by tensions concerning the kinds of conventions that ought to prevail and about the kinds of literary knowledge teachers ought to foster. As early as 1892, Professor Francis March, in an address to the Modern Language Association, noted that the young profession was

having an outcry . . . against stopping to study particular passages in literature, urging rapid emotional reading, the seeking to produce love of reading rather than knowledge of books—love of reading all the new magazines, I suppose, and newspapers, and novels . . . instead of spending days and nights with the great authors. . . . Professors who aim at the highest usefulness and the most honored position must labor to give profound knowledge and excite lasting love of great books and devotion to great thoughts. . . . Their literary studies must be mainly upon great authors. (1893, p. 27)



March's representation of professional divisions in the teaching of literature seems remarkably clear. On the one hand are the close reading of particular passages, "profound knowledge," "lasting love," and "great books." On the other hand are "rapid emotional reading," "love of reading," and "new magazines . . . newspapers, and novels." The representation places a knowledge of books in conflict with a love of books, careful reading in conflict with emotional reading, literature that has lasted in conflict with literature that is new. March left little doubt as to where his own loyalties lay, but his description of tensions already present in the teaching of literature one hundred years ago foreshadowed the kinds of debates that have continued ever since.

The year 1938 marked a turning point in those debates, for in that year two books that were to have an enormous impact on the teaching of literature were published. The first of these was *Understanding Poetry*, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's seminal collection of poetry and critical commentary that is usually cited as one of the anchoring documents of the New Criticism. In *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren laid out a set of principles that, in their view, should guide the reading and analysis of literature. In the book's opening statement—a statement they frame as a "Letter to the Teacher"—Brooks and Warren forwarded an approach that helped to shape the teaching of literature for decades to follow:

This book has been conceived on the assumption that if poetry is worth teaching at all, it is worth teaching as poetry. The poem in itself . . . remains finally the object for study. One must grasp the poem as a literary construct before it can offer any real illumination as a document. [In the teaching of literature] the treatment should be concrete and inductive, [and] the poem should be treated as an organic system of relationships. (pp. iv–xv)

With words such as "organic," "concrete," "construct," and "object," Brooks and Warren provided a vocabulary for discussing literature and the teaching of literature that emphasized literature's formal, objective characteristics and that deemphasized the importance of both the author and the reader. They were attempting, in other words, to construct an intellectually coherent and systematically objective method for reading and teaching texts—a method that would produce accurate, sound, defensible interpretations. Drawing heavily from the positivistic assumptions of the natural sciences, Brooks and Warren were trying to make the study of texts similar to the study of other phenomena. If texts are defined as objective, organic constructs, then close reading can be defined as the detached, objective analysis of those constructs. Studying literature, in this view, can be understood as comparable to studying biology or physics. The object of study is different, of course, but the method—the close, inductive investigation of parts and wholes—is similar. Poetry, Brooks and Warren argued, is not at all like

scientific writing; but criticism of poetry should probably aim for the same kind of clear-headed, objective analysis that we find in the best scientific inquiry.

It was, and it remains, a powerful argument. But it was only the first of two important statements about the teaching of literature that were to appear in 1938. The second was Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration*. A disciple of John Dewey, Rosenblatt was writing at a time when progressive thought about education was rich and lively, and she opened her book with a very different agenda from that of Brooks and Warren. "In a turbulent age," she wrote,

our schools and colleges must prepare the student to meet unprecedented and unpredictable problems. He needs to understand himself; he needs to work out harmonious relationships with other people. He must achieve a philosophy, an inner center from which to view in perspective the shifting society about him; he will influence for good or ill its future development. Any knowledge about man and society that schools can give him should be assimilated into the stream of his actual life. (p. 3)

Whereas Brooks and Warren open their volume with a discussion of what poetry is, Rosenblatt begins hers with a discussion of what students need. Whereas Brooks and Warren are at pains to say what a text is so that we might bring ourselves into a proper relationship with it, Rosenblatt is at pains to say who students are so that texts may be brought into proper relationship with them. For Rosenblatt, reading literature is not objective analysis, but an exploration, a process, an experience in which readers draw upon their own histories, their own emotions, in order to, quite literally, make sense of the text. Meaning for Rosenblatt is not found in the text; it is made by the reader in transaction with the text.

These transactions, these efforts to make sense of texts, will result in different readings from different readers, making arguments about the objective meaning of a text problematic, and making certainty about those meanings virtually impossible. A classroom emphasizing such transactions would be one in which readings are shared and explored and where students and teachers develop their associations with each other as well as with the texts under study. It would be a classroom, in other words, that would model the kind of democratic community that Dewey hoped to foster. Rosenblatt's perspective is clearly very different from that offered by Brooks and Warren—so different, in fact, that we may be surprised that the two perspectives were articulated in the very same year. That they were suggests that the professional tensions described by Francis March in his 1892 MLA address had not been resolved even fifty years after the event.

Those tensions remained, of course, but after 1938 and most especially after 1945, when the universities were flooded with returning soldiers, the

assumptions and critical procedures proposed by Brooks and Warren under the rubric of the New Criticism gained a nearly universal ascendancy in schools. Those assumptions and procedures were supported in part by the enormous prestige enjoyed by the natural sciences in mid-century and by the influence of the scientific method on almost every discipline. But what made the New Criticism so successful was not simply its implicit identification with scientific objectivity. Its case was helped enormously by the fact that it worked in classrooms (Ohmann, 1976; Eagleton, 1983; Graff, 1990). Students could be trained to do close readings, and they did not have to spend years examining the life of the author or the historical period of the text to do so. What was important about literature, the New Critics argued, was in the text. It was there for anyone to read, and almost anyone could be taught to do so.

The New Criticism, then, was not just scientific, it was, in its own way, democratic: almost anyone could be taught to do a close reading. Perhaps just as important for its popularity in schools, close reading in the New Critical tradition was a skill that could be evaluated. Readings could be judged as good, bad, or indifferent by a clear criterion of accuracy—by how adequately those readings accounted for the objective reality of the text itself. In a sense, then, the New Criticism mapped so neatly onto some of the conventions of schooling that it almost seemed as if the two had been made for each other. The New Criticism was not just a way of reading literature, it was a way of teaching literature, and, at least through the 1960s, the kinds of critical procedures proposed by literary scholars and the kinds of instructional procedures practiced by literature teachers shared a set of assumptions that effectively governed the production and consumption of knowledge in literary studies.

That set of shared assumptions among scholars and teachers has begun to unravel in the last two decades as reader-oriented developments in literary theory have brought into question many of the premises of the New Criticism. As Mailloux (1982) has argued, such reader-oriented critics

focus on readers in the act of reading. Some examine individual readers through psychological observations and participation; others discuss reading communities through philosophical speculation and literary intuition. . . . All share the . . . assumption that it is impossible to separate perceiver from perceived, subject from object. Thus they reject the text's autonomy, its absolute separateness, in favor of its dependence on the reader's creation or participation. Perception is viewed as interpretive; reading is not the discovery of meaning but the creation of it. Reader-response criticism replaces examinations of a text in-and-of-itself with discussions of the reading process, the "interaction" of reader and text. (p. 20)

By focusing on the reader and the text in transaction, rather than on the "text-in-and-of itself," reader-response theorists have raised a range of new

questions about how literary texts can be known. The questions address, among others, issues of gender (Fetterley, 1978; Tompkins, 1985), ethnicity (Gates, 1988; Lee, 1993), psychology (Bleich, 1975; Holland, 1975), and culture (Fish, 1980; Scholes, 1985). If readers are actively involved in the construction of literary meaning, then readers and the contexts surrounding readers are as important to the literary transaction as the texts to which the readers are responding. The most basic critical question in this view is not "What does this text mean?" but "How can this text be read?" and the answer to that question will depend ultimately on who is doing the reading and on what makes up the context of reading.

### **Language in the Classroom**

One of the most important contexts in which students learn how to read texts, of course, is the classroom. And in the classroom, readings are shaped primarily through discussion. If we are to understand what students are learning about literature, then, we must understand the nature of classroom discussion.

At least two traditions of scholarship have examined classroom talk. The first has provided detailed and consistent descriptions of how classroom talk proceeds. Beginning with Flanders's (Amidon & Flanders, 1963) use of "interaction analysis" in the early 1960s and extending through a range of studies in a variety of instructional settings (Barnes, 1969; Bellack, Kleibard, Hyman, & Smith, 1966; Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), this tradition has characterized classroom talk as a linguistic register with very specific conventions. In brief, discourse in classrooms seems to move fairly consistently in a three-turn pattern of teacher question—student response—teacher evaluation, a pattern Mehan (1979) described as initiation, response, evaluation (I/R/E). The questions tend to be closed rather than open, inviting factual or literal answers rather than answers requiring extensive reasoning or evaluation. Teachers provide the structure for discussions, orchestrating beginnings, conclusions, and topic shifts. In general, as Barnes (1969) has argued, such patterns suggest strongly that a "transmission model" of teaching and learning prevails in schools, with teachers providing the information that students are to absorb, and with students allowed little room to bring their own knowledge or language to bear on that information.

The transmission model of communication, with its assumption that a message can move intact from a sender to a passive receiver, is problematic if not naïve. In focusing on the message and the sender, it ignores the constructive way in which people interpret messages. If Rosenblatt is right in arguing that the reader's or receiver's characteristics affect the way in which meaning is constructed from texts and messages, then the transmission model badly underestimates the activity of the receiver in making sense of a message.

Nonetheless, as countless observers of classrooms have noted (e.g., Dillon & Searle, 1981; Goodlad, 1984; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991a), the transmission model prevails in American schools. A different perspective, however, has offered a powerful framework for understanding how talk may come to shape students' knowledge of the subjects they study in school, including literature. The work of Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986), Berger and Luckmann (1966), Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Wertsch (1985, 1991), and others has forwarded a view of learning that stresses the social influences on the ways in which people think. This view sees thinking as being shaped by the environment in which an individual develops, with language being among the primary mediators of learning in the environment. In most societies, language plays a crucial mediating role in the ways people internalize the norms, categories, patterns of thought, and values of a culture. Stated simply, in most cultures people learn how to think by listening to—and participating in—the ways in which the people around them talk.

In school, people talk in very particular ways. Schools are among the settings “where certain patterns of speaking and thinking are easier, or come to be viewed as more appropriate . . . than others” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 38). Bakhtin (1986) refers to these more appropriate patterns of speaking and thinking as “speech genres” and says that they become “privileged,” or widely and perhaps dogmatically accepted as the “right” way of communicating in particular settings.

What these language theorists have made clear is the stakes of the game. In studying classroom discourse, we are studying more than just recitation patterns; we are studying the processes through which the participants learn and perpetuate appropriate ways of knowing in classrooms. And what happens in classrooms affects for many students their sense of self-worth, their prospects for future success in school and career, and their belief in the value of formal learning.

## **The Project**

Our studies of discussions of literature, then, proceed from the instructional challenges presented by new, reader-oriented developments in literary theory and from powerful models of learning that may enable us to develop richer and more deeply reasoned portraits of the complex relationships between thinking and speaking. We believe strongly that the models of teaching literature that have prevailed in schools for almost half a century must be reimagined in light of new theory and new scholarship and that a clear view of current practice may be a helpful place to begin that larger project. As we explain in the next chapter, we have brought together our research in three complementary areas in order to help begin that portrait.

## 2 A Description of the Project

Our studies examine the nature of talk about literature in three contexts: (1) teacher-led large groups, (2) teacher-orchestrated small groups, and (3) adults and adolescents talking about literature outside classrooms. We have chosen to study talk about literature in these settings because they represent, we think, the most likely contexts in which discussions of literature will take place.

Three central questions guided our research:

1. What are the basic patterns of talk about literature in these three contexts?
2. What assumptions about teaching, learning, language, and literature inform that talk?
3. What are the important similarities and differences in the patterns of talk and in the purposes for talk in these three contexts?

Though each of our studies addresses these questions, our monograph differs from most in NCTE's Research Report series in that our studies were not conceived together as related elements of a unified project. Rather, as our understanding of discourse evolved, we began to recognize the connections among our research interests. Before we detail the studies we will be presenting, therefore, it seems to us worthwhile to take a short detour to explain how we brought our work together.

### **Beginnings**

Jim Marshall's studies of large-group discussions of literature are an outgrowth of interests he developed while doing his dissertation and provided in many ways the impetus for the other studies we report. Jim's dissertation (Marshall, 1987) details how the language of the classroom affects the nature of students' written and oral responses. Jim undertook the studies we report in Chapter 3 to take a more comprehensive look at the language of literary interpretation as practiced in schools and what the effects of that language might be. With a grant from the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature at SUNY-Albany, he spent a summer with six teacher-researchers,

who were themselves studying classroom discussions. Working from interviews with teachers and students and from transcripts of classroom discussions, Jim developed the coding system that we have adopted here. His experiences revealed to him a number of tensions that seem to inform classroom discussions and the teaching of literature more generally, tensions that led him to pursue his research on literary discourse in further studies.

Michael Smith first heard Jim present his work at the Midwinter Conference of the Assembly for Research. This conference is different from most in its small size (usually fewer than one hundred people attend) and in its emphasis on conversation (at several times during the conference the speakers and audience break out into discussion groups to talk about the papers the speakers have presented). Often conversations begun in these groups spill over into other venues as conference participants share meals or drinks. After hearing Jim's presentation, Michael was struck by how the intellectual engagement and enjoyment that characterized the talk among adults at the conference was so often absent in the discussions Jim had studied. Although classrooms and conferences are decidedly different contexts, noting that contrast inspired Michael to look outside classrooms for settings that might provide teachers an alternative model for talk about texts. And because he wanted to be able to compare those discussions to the ones Jim studied, it made sense for him to use the same method of analysis.

Jim became aware of Peter Smagorinsky's research on the relationship between teacher-led and small-group discussions of literature when he reviewed a grant proposal that Peter had written. Peter's research built on Jim's work by looking at one alternative to teacher-led discussions that Jim had recommended—small-group discussions—to investigate the extent to which they foster different types of discourse than characteristically occur in teacher-led discussions. Peter chose to adopt Jim's method of data analysis to enable him to situate his findings in a larger context. Because the value of small groups was a point of discussion in the high school where Peter was teaching, he enlisted several of his colleagues to join him in a teacher-research project that examined how students talked in large- and small-group settings, with particular attention to the relationships among the patterns of discourse between the two settings.

So although our studies were originally developed to be reported separately, they are all informed by the beliefs we articulate in Chapter 1 and use the same method of analysis. In that the three of us were friends to begin with and looked forward to the opportunity to learn more about our work by bringing it together, we decided to write this book. The studies are not, however, cut from exactly the same cloth. Jim's study is a comprehensive analysis of large-group discussions, while Peter's and Michael's studies are exploratory and consequently smaller in scope. Jim's and Michael's studies

include interview data and Peter's does not, in part because Peter would need to have interviewed himself in order to include such a component in his study; and though he is often accused of talking to himself, he thought it wise not to make such conversations public. Consequently, there will be some differences in the ways the studies are reported. As we have said, however, we believe the relationships among the studies diminish the problems caused by these methodological differences. Our efforts to identify those relationships were greatly aided by our using the same coding system in each of our studies. We next explain the features of that coding system, a system we use to analyze the transcripts of literary discussions reported in Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6.

### Method of Analysis

To examine the basic features of the discussions we studied, we used the coding system Jim had developed for his studies (Marshall, 1989). It distinguishes two levels of organization: speaker turns, which included everything a speaker said before yielding the floor; and communication units, which were statements within speaker turns that were coded for analysis. We analyzed each communication unit for linguistic function, for knowledge base, and for kind of reasoning. In the following section we provide an overview of the system for coding the communication units in the transcripts. Because the meaning of individual statements is clear only in the context of the discussions in which they are made, we illustrate the coding system with extended transcripts in the appendix, rather than with isolated statements in the sections that follow.

#### *Organization of Discussions*

In order to mark the boundaries that shape classroom discussions, each transcribed discussion was first segmented at two levels: communication unit and turn.

**Communication Unit:** The basic unit of analysis, communication units have the force of a sentence, though may be as short as one word (for example, "yes" or "okay"). They represent an identifiable remark or utterance on a single subject.

**Turn:** The most obvious boundary in most oral discourse, a turn consists of one or more communication units spoken by a single participant who holds the floor.

Transcripts were further divided into *episodes*, the largest segments of discourse analyzed. Episodes represent a sequence of speaker turns on a single, identifiable topic. To avoid confusion about the duration of episodes,



episode boundaries were marked only when one of the participants made an explicit move to do so, such as when a teacher told students to move on to a new point.

### *The Language of Discussions*

In order to examine the linguistic patterns and intellectual content of classroom discussions, each communication unit was coded within one of five basic categories and within one of several subcategories that allowed a closer analysis of its features. The major categories and their respective subcategories are explained below.

- I. *Direct*: any remark (even when it is represented as a question) that intends to move others (usually students) toward an action or to shift their attention or the focus on the discussion
- II. *Inform*: any statement of fact or opinion whose purpose is to represent what the speaker knows, believes, or thinks about a topic. Reading and quoting from texts are included here.

#### A. Nature of remark

- 1. Classroom logistics: refers to the management of classroom activities such as homework assignments, roll, reading completed
- 2. Reads or quotes from text
- 3. Instructional statements: refers to the substantive issues under discussion

If remarks were coded as instructional in focus, they were further analyzed for knowledge source and kind of reasoning.

#### a. Knowledge source

- (1) Personal-autobiographical (information drawn from the speaker's own experience)
- (2) Text (information drawn from the text under study)
- (3) Text-in-context (information about the author of the text, the historical period in which it was written, or its genre)
- (4) General knowledge (information drawn from the media or contemporary culture that is widely available)
- (5) Previous class discussions, lectures, or readings
- (6) Other

#### b. Kind of reasoning

- (1) Summary-description (statements which focus on the literal features of an experience or text)
- (2) Interpretation (statements which make an inference about the meaning or significance of information)
- (3) Evaluation (statements that focus on the quality of an experience or a text)