

Book Review

Corresponding author

marcello.giovanelli@nottingham.ac.uk

The Discourse of Reading Groups: Integrating Cognitive and Sociocultural Perspectives

David Peplow, Joan Swann, Paola Trimarco and Sara Whiteley

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The Discourse of Reading Groups: Integrating Cognitive and Sociocultural

Perspectives is an innovative and very readable book that aims to bring together methodologies and insights from cognitive linguistics/stylistics, reader response theory, interactional linguistics and the sociology of reading to provide an account of the ways in which people read in group scenarios. It is particularly concerned with exploring how what participants say about their reading sheds light on interpretative and identity-performing processes. The book draws on a number of research projects that the authors have been involved in, examining reading group data from a variety of settings including members' houses, bookshops and other public spaces, institutions (e.g. schools, prisons, workplaces) and various online forums. The focus throughout is on the joint, collaborative nature of the reading experience that marks reading within a group as distinctive from solitary reading; the authors' argument is therefore that the reading groups is a particularly interesting site of study for the academic researcher. The challenge set out in the book is to draw together cognitive

and the sociocultural perspectives, which the authors say have until now been seen as incompatible approaches, into a coherent and plausible account of such reading experiences, and an attractive and robust methodology for the exploration of discourse.

The book is split into seven chapters, including an excellent and comprehensive introduction that surveys the existing field and argues for the potential for new exciting new directions. Drawing on a diverse range of disciplines including linguistics, historical literary studies, empirical and experimental studies of literature, new literacies and sociology, the central claim of the introduction is that literary reading is a social activity bound by contexts in which reading takes place and marked by the relationships as they are enacted and performed by members of the group. The nature of any study of these phenomena, it is argued, should be about *how* people talk about books just as much, if not more than, *what* they talk about.

Chapter 2 introduces the field of cognitive stylistics and specifically Text World Theory (Werth 1999; Gavins 2007), a cognitive discourse grammar that provides a framework for accounting for discourse participants' mental representations formed during communicative acts. For those unfamiliar with the model, a detailed and very clear introduction provides a good background for the analyses of data that follows. The theory is used to explore how readers talk about emotions of characters in Kazuo Ishiguro's (2005) *Never Let Me Go* and how polarised responses to Simon Armitage's poem 'Accommodation' (Armitage 2010) can be explained by closely focusing on the linguistic detail of the poem to justify the varied interpretations that members of the reading groups proposed. Real strengths of this chapter are both the meticulous

attention to linguistic detail that frame the analyses and the convincing way in which the authors argue that a text-focused analysis can be used in conjunction with a consideration of extra-textual data so as to allow the analyst to explore meaning in a much more holistic way.

In Chapter 3, the book takes a diversion, in this instance drawing on sociological and the narratological theories of reading to examine the different ways that readers within group interactions position themselves in relation to the texts they are reading. There is an important discussion of how participants in reading groups enact and perform roles (in line with social constructionist view of identity) through the discourse itself. Again, through a very detailed and helpful discussion of the data, the authors show how readers legitimise and utilise personal experiences and resources to claim degrees of authority as they negotiate meanings with other participants.

Chapter 4 builds on previous discussion of identity projection to look at the ways in which readers *co-read* in developing novel, situated interpretations through interaction within the group setting. Again, the impressive analysis of data is used to show how readers draw on a range of usable resources including their own existing interpretations, those of others in the group, and a wealth of other textual, paratextual and extra-textual phenomena (knowledge of current events, personal experiences and so on). The authors adopt the term *interpretative bricolage* to explain this strategic resourcefulness. This chapter also focuses on interaction in more detail, including a consideration of the role of humour in identity construction and the negotiation of roles within the group. A particularly intriguing section is the adoption of Littleton

and Mercer's (2013) notion of *interthinking* to exemplify the collective thinking process that underpins much interaction.

Chapters 5 and 6 move in to more specific territory. Chapter 5 examines institutional discourse, whilst in Chapter 6, the authors explore the phenomenon of online reading groups. The early sections of Chapter 5 provide a welcome overview of historical and current perspectives on institutional discourse. Of particular interest to those researching and teaching in English education will be the analysis of school extra-curricular reading that follows. The authors show how reading in extra-curricular reading groups differs from the ways in which literature is framed and reading practices enacted in classrooms: the data in this chapter demonstrate that, although some elements of an asymmetrical relationship remain, participants including teachers or parents acting as facilitators perform largely different roles to those they would undertake in a classroom. The chapter also raises interesting questions about the connections – or not – between reading in school and at home: see Mason (2016) for an examination of this issue.

Chapter 6 completes the main analysis chapters of the book with a thorough and enlightening examination of online discourse, drawing on the literature related to medium-specific affordances and constraints, discourse structure and the construction of online and offline identities. In keeping with the other chapters, the detailed analyses of a literary blog, and group interaction on online book groups and social media sites are exemplary combining strong linguistic analysis with thoughtful interpretative comment.

In the final chapter, the authors draw together the main threads and arguments of the book, returning once more to the notion of *interthinking*. In this instance, a more refined consideration is provided of the concept of knowledge in Littleton and Mercer's account, which is integrated into a discussion of knowledge in Text World Theory. This in turn informs an innovative application of Text World Theory in the analysis of spoken interaction, which provides an insight into the layers of complexity as participants co-construct mental representations at various points of the discourse. As the authors note, this kind of analysis covers new – and exciting - ground for the theory.

Overall, this is an interesting book that seeks to move beyond existing disciplinary and methodological boundaries, and in doing so shows the clear value of integrating sociocultural and cognitive stylistic approaches to reading group data to examine both the groups themselves and the language they use as they shape and reshape interpretations. The very careful explanation of theory and the detailed and perceptive analyses of a range of data mean that this book should be accessible and of interest even to those without prior knowledge of the theories and concepts examined. In particular, for readers who might think 'cognitive' simply refers to Chomskyan linguistics, or to the study of brains, this book offers an intriguing insight into how frameworks that are fully sensitive to aspects of context might inform an integrated socio-cognitive discourse grammar, applicable to a range of discourse types. For those interested in English education, there is plenty to consider in terms of reading practices in and out of school. In particular, I found myself thinking long after I had finished the book about some of the implications that the authors raise for the practitioner and researcher in terms of the value of group work and talk in the

classroom, current discourses about the role of the teacher in the literature classroom, and questions of knowledge, authority and the social and negotiated nature of literary interpretation.

Marcello Giovanelli

University of Nottingham, UK.

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