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IN RHETORIC THE PASSAGE FROM A TO B IS NOT  
EQUAL TO PASSAGE FROM B TO A

Kenneth L. Pike

One occasionally hears the statement: "The intelligence of the American average reader is twelve years of age." Yet it would seem that the average intelligence should somehow be the intelligence of the average-- which is substantially more than twelve years of age. We wish to ask the question: Why should this absurdly wrong statement be treated by so many people as profoundly true?

Our reply: There is a presupposition underlying the statement of these people which is wrong. It assumes that the difficulty of the reader is the same as the difficulty of the author. That is, it assumes that the reader and author share the same problems; and that if the author could understand it, the reader should be able to understand it too.

But there is a difficulty to this presupposition. In any statement there is a range of ambiguity inevitably present. Every word comes from a set of words, in which different contexts can give it slightly different meanings. And every sentence has ambiguities introduced by possible discourse contexts. But as the author writes, he already has in mind some future contexts--or some historical experiences of knowledge of his own--which eliminate many of these possible ambiguities. Therefore, the author is unable to go wrong in choosing the wrong interpretation of some of his utterances which are otherwise in principle ambiguous.

For the reader, however, this is by no means true to the same degree. Granted that as he reads the first several words, the reader has already built up a context such that the next word must be coherent with the first ones, nevertheless there remains a whole wide range of experience of the author which is not directly accessible to the reader at that stage, if ever; and in addition the reader does not know in advance what has been in the mind of the author from the beginning of his writing. Hence, for the reader, many ambiguities cannot be resolved at the point where an ambiguous statement reaches him.

This difficulty of the reader can be greatly heightened if his own presuppositions incline him to interpret an ambiguous phrase in a direction which is quite contrary to that in which the author aims to take him. It is therefore not sufficient that the author merely be "clear"-- or avoid saying what he does not mean. He must somehow put up "sign posts" at any point where ambiguity has been detected by him, so that he can warn the reader not to go astray at that point. If, of course, the author--as is often the case--does not recognize these points he will not be in a position to put up such sign posts. It is in this connection, however, that an author

needs a good editor--or a set of friends--who will read a manuscript carefully; it would be hoped that they--representing numerous potential future readers--would in fact go astray where there were difficult ambiguities, and in their attempt to paraphrase back to their friend what they understood the author would find out where he was not clear, and could revise accordingly.

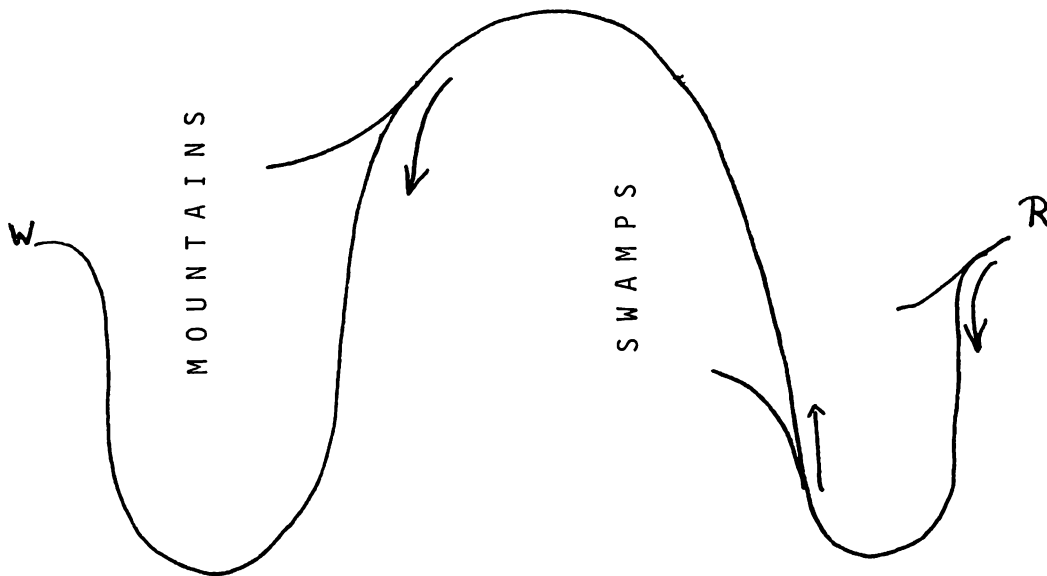


Fig. 1. Nonreciprocal problems of travelling from W to R and from R to W. W = writer's starting point; R = that of the reader. If W 'follows his nose' he does not get off the trail. If R has no signposts, but heads in the compass direction for W, he will get lost.

I have found it helpful, in trying to explain this difficulty to beginning writers, to use Fig. 1 to illustrate the problem in physical terms. Such an illustration might be useful, since it is hard for the writer to understand this principle. To himself he seems clear enough, and may resent the fact that a fellow student, spouse, or editor tells him that he's unintelligible. And he may therefore conclude that his readers have only the intelligence of a twelve year old. If, however, he studies the map in Fig. 1 in which he wishes to go from W (for Writer) to R (for Reader) he may see the problem in clearer terms.

The instructions needed to get W to R are simple: "Keep following the trail". Unless the traveller deliberately goes backwards, he will get safely to R, by merely "following his nose". There are mountains between W and R, and swamps, but in every case the trail is such that if he keeps going "straight" there is no side trail which will take him off the path and fail to get him to R. This is true even when the trail appears to be "pointing in the wrong direction" in order to get around mountain or swamp.

For R, however, the task is much more difficult. He can see the high mountain at W, in the distance, which is the goal he wishes to reach. But several times he will get lost if he uses that cue. If he attempts to "head for the goal," he will get in trouble. The reason is that, from his direction, there are "stray" headings toward W, which in fact lead him directly up the wrong mountain (for example, where there are places to get firewood, but where there are no trails over the mountain at all), or into a swamp (where people may be headed to pick up particular kinds of plants, but across which there is no trail). And in order for him to avoid these false moves, it is necessary that at the branches indicated there be signposts saying "head this way to get toward W."

If, now, we think of parts of the trails as sentences, and the journey as an essay, we can see why the writer often fails to sense the problem of his readers. To him there was no conscious choice of alternatives-- he simply "said what he meant". What he may not have understood is that the same sentences look very different "from the other direction"--that is to the reader. Choices occur in a context of choices, as indicated above, but by the time a writer reaches some points, many choices are already behind him, so that no difficult choice of statement reaches his attention. To the reader, on the contrary, the context is different. He does not know what is ahead, and even in looking toward the ultimate goal may fail to take a turn which gets him around the difficulty, so that he can arrive at the desired place.

Lessons for both the reader and writer are related to these: The reader will often profit by studying the table of contents, introductions to chapters, and summary statements at the end of a book, before trying to follow the detailed trail of thought. By this device he shares, in advance, some of the knowledge of the intermediate goals held by the writer, and will less easily be misled by residual ambiguities. The writer, on the

other hand, needs to sense the position of the reader by trying to imagine the problems of the reverse approach, and by giving the reader written warning at these spots. He can do this by telling the reader specifically to avoid drawing a conclusion which seems obvious but is not; or by warning the reader that this appears to be a side path to the main approach, but in fact is a necessary one if he wishes to reach the goal he has in mind.

Many other useful devices are available to the writer. He may use metaphor--as we've used a map--to illustrate the problem as a whole, or some subtle part of it. This helps the reader to understand the writer by the use of shared experience--outside the point of discussion--as a model for the new material. In fact, one can say that, in some sense, no advance conclusion can be made except through some kind of metaphor. The use of metaphor is merely a way of saying that one inevitably builds on his experience. The foundation of thought is the bedrock of physical experience, going back to eating and living--with metaphors growing from that, including such things as "feeding on the thought of others" or even "building an edifice on the foundation stone of the insights of one's predecessors." Further devices--for example antithesis, by highlighting differences--may help the reader to know where he is in relation to a larger plan, by showing him where he is not.

But, in any case, going from W to R is not the same as going from R to W. And the writer needs to be sympathetic with the reader in this sense. Beginning students in linguistics--or in any other discipline--need to be alerted to this nonreciprocity between the problem of reading and writing, lest they miss an audience which they eagerly wish to contact. This often involves the study of special usages of English structures: for example, the taking of a conclusion to an article, and putting it as an introduction at the beginning--the reversal of the normal line of argumentation. (That is, one could understand the written structure of a detective story better, if he were to read the last chapter first, so that he could see, as he read through the book, that sufficient cues had in fact been given to allow a reader to have deduced the solution.) This involves a theoretical problem of great magnitude--the relation between grammatical (linear) structuring, and referential (conceptual) structuring of the same material. This topic is too extensive for this brief article, but one who wishes to have some start at looking in this direction might consult Pike and Pike (1972) for exercises in reshaping materials from normal to off-normal sequence; Schoettle and Pike (1972/1973), for constraints on such reworking of relationships, differing between paragraphs versus within paragraphs; Westrum (1976) for chronological versus participant mapping of events to see how simultaneity is put together; Erickson and Evelyn Pike (1976) for some early differentiation between grammatical and referential structure, followed up by Pike and Pike (1977 and 1982) for more explicit statement of the difference between referential and grammatical structures.

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