

Prototypes in Text-Types: Political Discourse

Nelly Tincheva, PhD

Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'
Faculty of Classical and Modern Languages
Department of British and American Studies
15 Tzar Osvoboditel Blvd.
Sofia, Bulgaria.

Abstract

The paper seeks to contribute to the long-standing debate surrounding the notion of text-types by supporting a case for the application of Prototype theory to academic conceptualizations of the term. In accordance with basic postulates of prototypology, the theoretical alternative presented here is supported by results from a perception-based study including 60 university students. The study focuses on the persuasive text-type; the procedures applied and the results reported associate with texts from the domain of political discourse. The method adopted is cognitive as it coheres fully with prototypology. The data reported support the premise of the key importance of prototypology in understanding text-types.

Keywords: text-type, prototype, political discourse, persuasive power

1. Introduction

It is probably common-place to start by stating that the notion of *text-type* has been around since Aristotelian times and that, currently, it has been employed in a variety of language-related approaches ranging from Applied linguistics to Translation studies. Nevertheless, *text-type* is still a notion on which there is lack of sufficient consensus. Moreover, there is no theoretically-apt and analytically-applicable definition of *text-types*, which is a fact that, as will be argued below, presents a hurdle on linguists' path towards understanding textual communication. What is more, the ambiguities in the debate surrounding the very notion of *text-types* may be argued to surpass even those in the debate regarding the notion of *genre*. Comparing and contrasting *text-types* and *genres* itself has also proved far from a fruitful task. The present paper seeks to contribute to the debate on the nature of *text-types*. It will attempt to do so by arguing a case for the overt application of Prototype theory to the notion. The major hypothesis here suggests *text-types* tend to be perceived as prototypes rather than as clear-cut, disparate categories and that *text-types* also function in accordance with the postulates of Prototype theory (as discussed below).

A claim like that, admittedly, is far from entirely new to linguistics, applied linguistics and discourse analysis. It has been either explicitly formulated (see, e.g., Hogan, 2003, 2011; Herman, 2009; Hyvärinen, 2012) or consistently implied throughout research (e.g. de Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981; Virtanen, 1992; Toledo, 2005). However, any literature review will also reveal that all claims of the interconnection between prototypology and *text-types* are invariably put forward in discord with one of the most basic premises of Prototype theory. As that particular premise has it, there needs to be perceptually-based and statistically-verifiable confirmation for any analysts' claims (Rosch, 1973, 1975; Ungerer and Schmid, 2006). Contrary to that postulated requirement, the theoretical assumption that *text-types* indeed operate prototypically has remained little more than just a theoretical assumption. Thus, the main objective of the study presented here is supplying perceptual and statistical data on whether prototypes indeed are seen as the cognitive constructs (term as in Tincheva, 2015) controlling conceptualizations of *text-types*. In full accordance with Prototypology, it aims to provide statistical perceptual verification of the hypothesis. The general method applied in the study is a quantitative one as it coheres well with the basic postulates of Rosch's experimental Prototype theory (Rosch, 1975; Taylor, 2003). The research method applied is experiment.

1. Theoretical overview of the problem

Generally, the concept of *text-type* can be argued to represent analysts' need to classify texts according to functions they have the potential to perform (for a detailed overview see, e.g., Snell-Hornby, 2006). Biber sees *text-types* as underlying communicative functions (1989); Werlich defines *text-type* as expressing the dominant function of a text (1976); Hatim and Mason maintain *text-type* is 'a conceptual framework which enables us to classify texts in terms of communicative intentions serving an overall rhetorical purpose' (1990: 140); Reiss (1976) also sees them as dependent exclusively on text purpose.

However, it should be noted that there are some, although very few, exceptions to that view. Virtanen, for instance, approaches *text-types* as the results of combining text/discourse producer's intent with form. Virtanen even finds it necessary to postulate two different terms to match the function-form duality. Thus, she proposes *text-type* as a formal, linguistic category in opposition to *discourse type* as a function-based category (1992: 302). Virtanen's proposal, nevertheless, does not prove acceptable to the majority of linguists, who prefer the interpretation of *text-types* as interconnected with communicative purposes above all.

The previous, however, should not be interpreted as a claim of the existence of scholarly agreement on what actually counts as a text-type function. More precisely, the above generalization is not meant to be interpreted as representing an equally unanimous academic agreement on how to classify the basic (or, meta-) text-type functions. The issue proves to be a matter on which there is insufficient consensus, although the Aristotelian *narration, description, exposition* and *argumentation* are still frequently resorted to. Thus, to Werlich (1976) and to Hatim and Mason (1990) the functions are five as those authors add '*instruction*' to Aristotle's list. De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), too, propose more than the four classical text-types be delineated: *narrative, argumentative, descriptive, scientific, didactic, and poetic* and *literary* ones. In contrast, Reiss (1976) argues the list should be shortened and she defines three main functions only: *informative* (in which arguments, intentions, opinions, feelings, etc. are communicated and the text-type focuses on the text's topic); *expressive* (in which the artistic expression is of special significance thus focusing the text-type on the text producer); and *operative* (in which the subsequent actions and reactions of the text receiver(s) are on focus).

The idea of 'focusing' is also present in an approach which stands out against the above list of noteworthy proposals and interpretations of the issue. Trosborg's works, too, resort to focus-background profiling principles in explaining *text-types*. Trosborg argues that there are four major components of every communicative exchange and that any of them can be highlighted: text producer, text receiver, the object being referred to and the linguistic structures used (1997:13). If the main focus is on the text producer, she argues, the function will be 'expressive'; if the focus is on the text receiver, the text will be 'persuasive'; if the focus falls on the linguistic structures employed, the *text-type* will be 'literary'; and if the text highlights objects from reality, the function will be 'referential'. Trosborg's research, however, also does not afford the reader confirmation of that precept in terms of perceptual data received from actual language users. The conclusions in her works, not unlikely those of the works cited earlier here, are largely dependent on the author's interpretation only. It is one of the main objectives of the study presented here to provide such data.

Another point in favor of focusing on Trosborg's theory is that, according to it, no text is expected to display features of one text-type only. All texts, she argues, are multifunctional (ibid.: 16) – a claim echoed by Werlich and Virtanen, too. In other words, to Trosborg, pure narration, pure description, pure exposition and pure argumentation are extremely rare as each text may employ several text-types. Furthermore, she supports the view that one of the set of text-types being employed will, normally, be identifiable as dominant. In a similar vein, Hatim and Mason (1990:146) maintain text-types are highly susceptible to 'hybridization' and what should classify a text as belonging to one of the types is its dominant function. De Beaugrande and Dressler similarly argue that the 'demands or expectations associated with a text type can be modified or even overridden by the requirements of the context of occurrence' (1981: 182). Such theories, however, avoid using overtly the term 'prototype'. None of those theories, furthermore, has provided statistical data as proof of their premises. Generally, text-type-related theories invariably rely on common-sense researchers' beliefs only and not on actual perceptual data obtained from real language users. The study reported here is targeted at filling this specific niche.

The notion of 'prototype' in its turn, appeared in the literature at the advent point of cognitive research. It's coming into being reflects the crucial importance of categorization to any study of linguistic phenomena acknowledged almost unanimously throughout linguistic studies (see e.g. Lakoff, 1982; Feldman, 2006).

However, the answers to what categorization actually is and how to analyze it have not been characterized by similar scientific agreement. Historically speaking, category formation and the boundaries between categories used to be interpreted for centuries from the viewpoint of either Dichotomy or Classical typology (Ungerer and Schmid, 1996; Taylor, 2003).

On those two views, every category member either fits within clear-cut category boundaries or it does not. However, if that principle was really operative, song lyrics, to use a simple example, should never classify as *text*. Second, both Dichotomy and Classical typology postulate every category as lying unequivocally disparate from others. With respect to text-types in particular, that would mean, for instance, an informative and a narrative text-type would never have anything in common. In other words, a short story should never present any information on any of the objects or characters it depicts. Generally, no hybrid text-types or genres could/ should possibly exist.

Prototype theory - which emerged in the works of Eleanor Rosch (1973, 1975) – rejects all the above assumptions. Since her earliest scientific advances, extensive research on prototypes has consistently shown that there are no clear-cut boundaries between categories; that there are fuzzy boundaries among categories because categories tend to overlap; that some representatives of a category are ‘better’ examples of the core category prototype; and that there are perceptual specificities in each person’s classifying an example as belonging to one or more category.

Crucially, Rosch bases all her theoretical assumptions on statistical data from experiments with actual language users. Hence Prototype theory relies heavily on the presence of culturally-conditioned and, consequently, statistically verifiable agreement among the members of a culture on what counts as the best example of a category, i.e. a prototype.

2. The study

3.1. Rationale

Three issues seem to need at least some further clarification before the data is presented here:

The first issue concerns the fact that the notion of *text-type* is far from being frequently employed even by linguists. Although knowledge of *text-types* is sometimes defined as ‘obligatory textual competence’ every participant in a communicative exchange should possess (as, e.g., in Van Dijk, 1972), it seems safe to argue that few people unrelated to linguistic academic practices use the term. The notion of *text-types* tends to be employed only by a certain number of teachers, academics and writers. The term could not be considered to be part of general knowledge and vocabulary, as, for instance, the term *genre* could be. Therefore, by necessity, any statistical study on how the notion of text-type operates needs to confine itself to linguists’ responses only. The study reported here abides by that necessity. The present paper endeavors to provide perceptual data on *text-types* specifically in relation to university practices and does so by providing data on responses obtained from university students.

The second issue concerns the fact that the respondents in the study had been taught *text-types* as part of their curriculum prior to their participation. Admittedly, text-types tend to be taught not only to selected audiences but also highly prescriptively (Dudley-Evans, 1998) and not overtly as prototypes (Kettemann and Marko (2002) and Montgomery et al. (2000) would be, perhaps, the notable exceptions). Despite the general preference for prescriptivism in teaching text-types (see Paltridge, 2001; 2013), the present investigation by necessity resorts to university contexts as the ‘natural’ environment for conducting a study on *text-types*. Indeed, the study aims precisely at that – to find proof or disproof of the assumption that, even though taught prescriptively, in actuality *text-types* do operate as prototypes. The last issue to note concerns the choice of discourse domain selected for the questionnaire to focus on. As all the participants in the study took parallel classes in political discourse, that became the domain of operation to serve as source of the specific texts included in the study.

3.2. Stages

In the Study, 60 third-year Bachelor’s degree students at the Department of British and American Studies at Sofia University were asked to fill in a questionnaire consisting of four tasks. The respondents were not chosen in accordance to any variable such as academic achievement(s), age, race, gender, etc. Instead, the selection happened on a random basis.

The respondents were expected to:

- fill a questionnaire,
- Participate in subsequent in-class discussions of the (results from the) questionnaire.

3.3. Data and discussion

In Stage 1, the respondents were presented with three texts, all associating with the domain of political discourse. The respondents were expected to fill in two Tables, each table requiring that the *text-type* of each of the three texts be determined. The text-type alternatives offered in the tables follow Trosborg's interpretation of how *text-types* should be classified (1997). The reason behind this choice is that Trosborg's is the interpretation most readily relating to cognitive factors (in this case, the potential of focusing on a conceptual region/ segment) and, consequently, to the principles of prototypology advocated here. However, it should be noted that, despite the strengths of Trosborg's interpretation, the very labels she proposes seem rather problematic. As reported in an advance pilot poll involving 10 of the future respondents (unpublished), the Aristotelian labels tend to be rather entrenched for users and avoiding them could possibly lead to distortions in the results obtained. In addition, Trosborg's label of 'literary' can be argued to associate with what is generally accepted to be a discursive domain, while 'referential' has a long history of associating with lexical meaning exclusively. Instead of 'referential', the label of 'informative' is adopted to express the potential of focusing on textual content – a choice dictated by Reiss's influential classification (as discussed in 2 above).

The texts selected for inclusion in the study are:

Text 1 is Jill Stein's Presidential campaign slogan of 2016 'It's in our hands'.

Text 2 is Darius Foster's 2014 campaign ad titled '*In a Box*'. Darius Foster is a Republican who ran for the Alabama State House. His ad was included for being voted on the Internet as the most successful ad of the 2014 campaign.

Text 3 is President Reagan's 1964 speech '*A Time for Choosing*', which appears in all major compilations and analysis of the genre as '*The Speech*'. It was selected due to its being generally accepted as one of the highest quality, i.e. it is present in almost all anthologies of political speeches.

In performing the tasks, the respondents were expected to:

- identify themselves with the text receiver,
- provide information based only on their immediate responses, and
- not supply information on what they might perceive as 'general' or 'objective' evaluations but only their personal interpretations.

Task 1 asked the respondents to choose only one text-type alternative as 'the true/ right' answer. Table 1 at the end of the paper offers the result from the completion of Task 1. The numbers presented are in terms of net total of answers obtained.

Task 2 required the respondents to choose freely and not restrict their answers only to one text-type as 'the true/ right' answer. Instead, the alternatives offered this time allowed the participants to make decisions in terms of 'more or less' important functions as well as to perceive the texts as being of 'mixed type' or 'multifunctional', to use Trosborg's terms (see 2.1 above). The respondents were asked not to comply with their own answers in Task 1 but, instead, to provide their immediate response to the current question.

Table 2 at the end of the paper offers the result from the completion of Task 2. The numbers presented are in terms of net total of answers obtained.

The conclusions which can be drawn from the data above can be listed separately for each table, or, alternatively, they can be viewed jointly and through cross-referencing. The following are the major points drawn, first, for either table and, then, systematized conjointly:

- The figures in Table 1 display an absence of 100 % agreement on any *text-type*. In other words, in all the responses to all the questions, there is a total absence of unanimous agreement on one *text-type* only. This can be seen as a single, sufficient confirmation of the major hypothesis that *text-types* function perceptually according to the principles of prototypology and not to principles of classical typology. Nevertheless, further confirmation of the hypothesis will be sought on.

- Table 1 also confirms the initial assumption that principles of dichotomy do not apply to actual perceptions of *text-types*. If that were the case, the answers would fall into two groups only (with the additional possibility for the existence of an argument claiming one group comprises the ‘right’ answer and the other – the ‘wrong’ one). In the results obtained from the actual language users, the responses fall into four groups – a fact which precludes the possibility for a two-options-only interpretation.
- In all the responses to the questions reported in Table 1, there can be isolated a clear category center, with the numbers in it varying from 27 out of 60 to 41 out of 60. Peripheries are also evident as with respect to all three texts, the answers fan out into full four kinds of responses.
- In terms of center-periphery distribution, the responses relating to the political speech display the best-pronounced category core. That, however, could not be attributed to the nature of the whole genre in question as the sample tested is only one exemplifying it. What is more, the particular speech has generally proven to be of exceptional quality and, thus, could not be considered to be representative of the average (i.e. around 50%) quality expected of a text from this genre. On both accounts, the data obtained on the political speech sample here do not provide a solid basis for overall genre generalizations. What is of utmost significance here, nevertheless, is the fact that even in the case of such an excellent example of its genre, which leads to the indubitable formation of a sound category core, there exist respondents’ answers spreading over a periphery. Simply put, the very quality of the speech in question only reinforces further the conclusion about the absence of unanimity in actual users’ perceptions and the force of prototypology.
- Out of the three samples, the political advertisement proves to have generated the greatest number of ‘undecided’ responses. The reason for that is likely to lie in the fact that the political aspect of the statement is not immediately evident. In other words, the wording of this specific advertisement does not overtly and immediately associate the text with the political domain. Indeed, the statement could easily pertain to general, everyday English and not necessarily carry political content. Hence it is possible to explain the high percentage of ‘undecided’ choices here as also associated with the quality of the specific sample of text (similarly to the case of the political speech, discussed right above).
- The figures in Table 2 also display an absence of 100 % agreement on any text-type. In all the responses to all the questions, there, too, as in Table 1, is a total absence of unanimous agreement on one text-type only. This can also be seen as a single, sufficient confirmation of the major hypothesis that *text-types* function perceptually according to the principles of prototypology and not to principles of classical typology. Nevertheless, these results are seen here as simply adding further confirmation of the major hypothesis.
- Table 2 also confirms the fact that principles of dichotomy do not apply to actual perceptions of *text-types*. If that were the case, the answers would fall into two groups only, while in Table 2, in similarity to Table 1, the responses fall into four groups and prove a two-options-only interpretation implausible.
- In similarity to Table 1, for all the responses to the questions reported in Table 2, there can be isolated a clear category center. A periphery is also evident as the responses fan out into full three or four kinds of responses.
- In terms of center-periphery distribution, the responses in Table 2 show that the number of ‘undecided’ preferences drops radically when parallel functions are allowed as possible answers. This can be interpreted as strong proof of the actual overlapping of *text-types* and the operation of prototypological principles. Were *text-types* dependent on perceptions in terms of classical categorization, allowing for more than one ‘correct’ answer would have not diminished the processing effort and, as a result, have diminished the number of undecided voices.
- Surprisingly, introducing the possibility for choosing more than one function leads to the secondary functions’ generally attracting more agreement. Simply put, when faced with the freedom of choosing more than one *text-type* as the ‘correct’ answer, respondents appear to keep disagreeing about the ‘best’ or ‘core’ choice but agree more on what the parallel, or ‘supporting’, function is. As the results stem from the analysis of three text samples only, any possible explanations of the fact might prove dependent on the quality of the samples themselves and, consequently, more justifiable against the results from a larger future inquiry into the matter.
- The overall results from the two Tables cohere fully and can be in no aspect interpreted as contradicting each other.
- Overall, the results from both Tables prove conclusively the operation of prototypology in the actual perception of *text-types*, as confirmed by real-language users.

3. Conclusion

By way of final words, the present paper intended to offer an alternative approach to *text-types* which tries and avoids any prescriptive and clear-cut definitions on how they operate. The main objective of the study presented here was to supply perceptual data on whether prototypes indeed are seen as the cognitive constructs controlling conceptualizations of *text-types*.

The results from the questionnaire and the subsequent analysis confirm the basic assumption. The results and the analysis also prove that prototypes are the actual cognitive constructs controlling the operation of *text-types*. On the basis of the data reported and discussed here, further research on domains other than the political one may follow. Such analyses, arguably, are quite likely to provide significant insight into the phenomenon of text production/ reception as well as into the workings of the human mind in general.

Tables:

	PERSUASIVE TEXT-TYPE	INFORMATIVE TEXT-TYPE	EXPRESSIVE TEXT-TYPE	UNDECIDED
TEXT 1	10	9	14	27
TEXT 2	17	29	12	2
TEXT 3	41	12	3	4

Table 1: Respondents' choices in terms of a single text-type

TEXT 1	PRIMARY TEXT-TYPE		SECONDARY TEXT-TYPE	
	PERSUASIVE	26	PERSUASIVE	8
INFORMATIVE	14	INFORMATIVE	28	
EXPRESSIVE	12	EXPRESSIVE	20	
UNDECIDED	8	UNDECIDED	4	
TEXT 2	PERSUASIVE	19	PERSUASIVE	25
	INFORMATIVE	25	INFORMATIVE	13
	EXPRESSIVE	16	EXPRESSIVE	18
	UNDECIDED	0	UNDECIDED	4
TEXT 3	PERSUASIVE	44	PERSUASIVE	14
	INFORMATIVE	10	INFORMATIVE	27
	EXPRESSIVE	4	EXPRESSIVE	18
	UNDECIDED	2	UNDECIDED	1

Table 2: Respondents' choices in terms of primary and secondary text-types

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