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Michael McKenna  
*University of Missouri, Columbia*

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# READING VIEWED AS THE RESULT OF WRITING

*Michael McKenna*

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI, COLUMBIA

In its typical circumstances, the process of silent reading is essentially an individual endeavor. It is individual, however, only in the sense that a single person, functioning alone, attempts to “decode,” or “reconstruct,” meaning from written language. While this view is in itself an accurate one, it is not altogether adequate. A much fuller, and certainly a more realistic, perspective becomes possible when reading is seen as the inevitable result of writing.

The importance of such an overview is most apparent in the distinction between good and bad, correct and incorrect, acceptable and unacceptable, reading. In the former categories, the difference between that meaning which is expressed by the writer (both implicitly and explicitly) and that which is afterward reconstructed by the reader is small. Indeed, the primary goal of all reading teachers should be to make it as small as possible. But in focusing their concern on the expression and reconstruction of meaning, they seldom recognize that meaning originates in a form which is distinct from either of these. It begins with the writer, as intended meaning. His task in writing is to convert his intentions into expressions, and it is from the latter alone that the reader must infer the former.

From writer to reader, then, there are three regions, or “sets,” of meaning, all of which interact. One is intended, one is expressed, one is reconstructed. And if the difference in the last two is a measure of effective reading, the difference in the first two is a measure of effective writing. This relationship is depicted in Figure 1.

The overlapping of these areas makes it possible to classify meaning in seven specific ways. Region *a*, the mutual intersection of the three areas, represents the ideal for readers and writers alike. Here, meaning is both intended and expressed by the writer and in turn is successfully reconstructed by the reader. The single objective of the writer is met: to express what is intended in the hope it will be reconstructed. Similarly, the single objective of the reader is attained: to reconstruct what has been expressed in the hope it has been intended. Put mathematically, both objectives reduce to a single formula:

$$M_i = M_e = M_r.$$

If region *a* is the ideal, however, then each of the other six regions must indicate some manner of error, some malfunctioning of the process. Region *b*, for example, represents meaning which is neither intended nor expressed but which is nonetheless gathered by the reader. In this case, the reader is

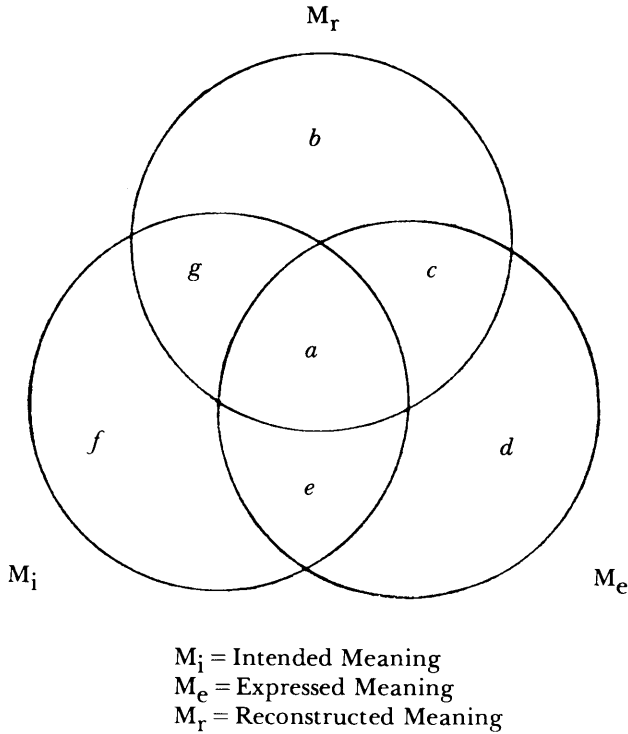


Figure 1. Regions of Meaning in Reading and Writing

exclusively at fault. Region *c* represents that meaning which is expressed and reconstructed but which somehow has not been intended by the writer. Accordingly, it is the writer who is to blame. Region *d* stands for meaning which, while expressed, is neither intended by the writer nor reconstructed by the reader. The writer, then, is in error here for having expressed what he did not intend, but the reader is also at fault for having failed to read what has been expressed. In a sense, this joint culpability may operate for the best in that unintended information does not pass to the reader. Region *e* depicts meaning both intended and expressed but which has been missed by the reader. Here, then, the mistake is the reader's. Region *f* represents that portion of the writer's intended meaning which he fails either to express or to convey, and, accordingly, the failure is exclusively his. Region *g*, on the other hand, also depicts meaning which was intended but not expressed. Here, however, the reader has somehow stumbled onto the writer's unexpressed intent. Even though the result is good, the reader has erred in arriving at such meaning because it has not been expressed. There is a

difference between speculating as to the author's thoughts on the basis of the text and erroneously "perceiving" them in language which does not contain them. Like region *d*, therefore, region *g* is a source of error jointly attributable to reader and writer.

The similarity of regions *d* and *g* regarding error is not an accident. The sources of mistakes in the writer-to-reader sequence comprise a systematic pattern which can best be emphasized by reproducing Figure 1 so that each region reflects the responsibility for its presence outside the intersection.

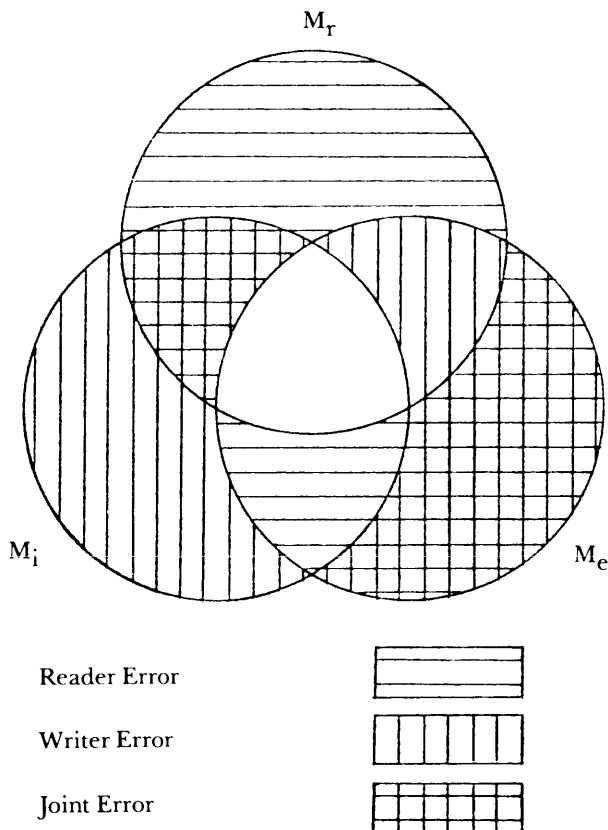


Figure 2. Sources of Error in the Writer-to-Reader Sequence

So far, consideration has been given only to the individual sectors created by the overlapping of the three major meaning areas. Further analysis is possible when these regions are thought of collectively as comprising larger sets. Regions *b* and *c* together represent all meaning which is reconstructed but unintended. Regions *b*, *c*, and *d* represent all meaning

which is expressed and/or reconstructed but which is unintended by the writer. This process of forming groups of twos and threes can be continued until region *a* has been circled and one arrives again at *b*. Additional groupings of interest are regions *a* and *g*, *a* and *c*, and *a* and *e* in that they constitute the simple intersections of the three main areas. Lastly, the collection of all regions except *a* represents the totality of error in the writer-to-reader sequence—a suggestion previously made.

A basic strength of envisioning the reading process as part of a more encompassing operation lies in the clear analysis of problem situations. For example, it is tempting to say that region *b* can involve writer as well as reader error in the case of ambiguous expression. That is, the reader may be misled into reconstructing unexpressed meaning. But if the reader is aware of the ambiguity as he reads (as he should be) and infers properly (i.e., according to the author's intent), the situation falls in region *a*. If, on the other hand, he infers improperly, the situation falls in region *c*. Ambiguous language involves a choice of expressions. The fact of the expression limits the regions to *a*, *c*, *e*, and *d*. The fact of the choice limits these to *a* and *c*. Region *b* is reserved for meaning which is reconstructed by the reader but which is not expressed, not even ambiguously.

A further strength of the model lies in its generality. As it is presented, error may seem to fall rather regularly into each of the satellite regions. This is a practical convention, however, for while actual circumstances may reduce some areas and increase others, no such changes can be generalized to all situations. The works of a great writer, more than for other writers, should virtually eliminate regions, *c*, *d*, *g*, and *f*. He expresses what he intends to express. Moreover, the good reader, unlike the poor one, compels the reduction of regions *e*, *d*, *g*, and *b*. That is, he intends to reconstruct what has been expressed.

The goals of both reading and writing, then, are most profitably viewed in conjunction. In this way only does the relationship of one to the other become both comprehensive and comprehensible.