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Overlapping Textualities:  
From Literary Machine to Binary-born Texts

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Guest Editor Profile 5

Introduction 7  
*Giovanna Di Rosario*

ARTICLES

The Poetic Machines of Monsignor Juan Caramuel y Lobkowitz 11  
*Ricardo Pérez Martínez*

From the Metafunctions of Language to the Hyperfunctions. 25  
The New Multimodal Reality of Hypertext  
*María Ángela Celis Sánchez*

Christine Wilks' Women, Politics and Poetics 37  
*Oreto Doménech*

Rhetoric, Music and Philosophy in <i>88 Constellations for Wittgenstein</i> by David Clark: Intermedial and Intertextual Practices <i>Nobelia Meza and Giovanna Di Rosario</i>	55
Practicing Online Travel Writing. How My Blogging and Australia Met <i>Stefano Calzati</i>	77

# From the Metafunctions of Language to the Hyperfunctions

## The New Multimodal Reality of Hypertext

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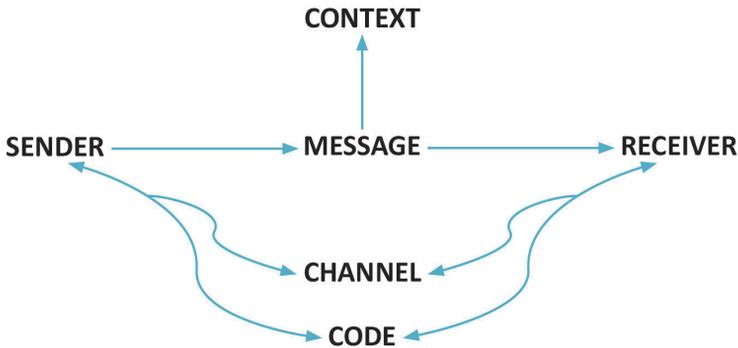
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ABSTRACT – Every act of communication stems from the existence of two individuals, who, at least, establish a relationship to share a particular type of information. That relationship will result in a communication model that, with the advent of information and communication technology, has undergone a remarkable change, so that the message is no longer linear or sequential to become a set of multiple relationships which affect the sender, recipient and message. Among the many changes that occur in this new communication model, one of which relates to the sociolinguistic springs that run through the relationship between sender and receiver. In this essay, we try to explain how these relationships work from a theoretical point of view, so that we can speculate a sort of model applicable to each enunciation. To do this we will start from the theoretical assumptions proposed by M.A.K. Halliday who, by combining autonomous linguistic sources with sociolinguistics, offered a theory of language known as “systemic functional”, being supported by the study of language as a system and by the functions arising from its use or metafunctions of the language, namely ideational metafunction, interpersonal metafunction and textual metafunction. In the telematic space, with the peculiarities that define hypertextual communication, the metafunctions became different from that described for oral and written environments. All of them will be hyperfunctions or multifunctions precisely because of the multimodal essence (text, image and sound) that houses them. We intend to theoretically bring the distances produced from the jump from the analogue environment to the digital environment, to propose a kind of specific theory for this new communicative space.

KEYWORDS – electronic discourse; hypertext; metafunctions; systemic functional linguistics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Every act of communication stems from the existence of two individuals, who, at least, establish a relationship to share a particular type of information. That relationship will result in a communication model that, with the advent of Information and Communication Technology, has undergone a remarkable change, so that the message is no longer linear or sequential in order to become a set of multiple relationships which affect the sender, recipient and message. The communication model to which we refer is none other than the one designed by Roman Jakobson in 1958 for his work *Linguistics and Poetics* that, as we have stated, provides only one type of linear communication, specifically for oral and written modes. But Information and Communications Technology, with the Internet at its head, has brought a new communicative reality which is, firstly, breaking the linearity of discourse in digital environments. This brings a number of changes that have been made naturally by all the participants of communication, described in the named model proposed by Jakobson, consisting of the following participants (*Fig. 1*).



*Figure 1. – Jakobson's communication model.*

Indeed, the classic model of communication, typical of what we could call an analogue society based on sequential reading and writing, has suffered with hypertext, a number of changes mainly regarding sender, receiver, mes-

sage and channel, and that therefore gives rise to a specific type of discourse and its own characteristics. In fact, the advent of telematic networks and the spread of Internet and hypertextual language, have led to a new type of *non-linear communication rather than sequential*, which we could say characterise a type of digital society. In this way, the Internet becomes not only technology but also a specific social space with its own, differentiated communications based on a series of communication patterns, some of which we will discuss below.

## 2. HYPERTEXT

For us, it is not correct to speak of “hypertext” as a linguistic product itself, although it is the common trend, given that specifically by hypertext we have to understand a multifaceted reality in which both technological circumstances (Hypertext Markup Language or HTML, for example) and literary circumstances (related to theories of reception, as outlined by Bakhtin, Kristeva, Derrida, among others, or for literary works that require the receiver to carry out work of purely hypertextual jumps and selections, as shown in *Rayuela*, by Julio Cortazar, as a paradigmatic example in our language) are involved, and, of course, for purely linguistic and discourse construction circumstances. A result of this is that what we call e-discourse, meaning electronic discourse, which is the specific discursive form of the electronic or digital environment that combines text, static image and/or moving and sound, formed from the relation between their different external or internal parts, that can be linked to each other and form a full textual unit.

To qualify as such, the textual unit must make full sense, which we will call *pantextual sense* or *pantextual structure*, and which corresponds to the full text, in its complete polymorphic state, that is, the text as the sum of each and every one of the elements which configure its external appearance which includes oral, iconic and aural forms which appear in it, and that need each other to configure its own global significance.

The acceptance of this structure means, as previously stated, the recognition of the change in the skills of the participants in the communication process. For the type of classic communication model, the Jakobsonian model was enough, however, for electronic discourse we need to relocate the role of these participants, as shown in the diagram below (*Fig. 2*).

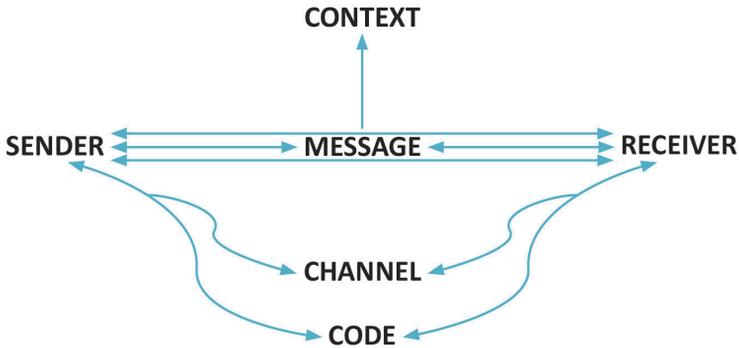


Figure 2. – Jakobson's communication model review.

The two models correspond, respectively, to reflect the changes brought about by the passage of an analogue society based on linear or sequential text, i.e. the text reflecting the book-centric culture, in the words of Laura Borràs to which we remain somehow anchored (Borràs 2006, 28) an idea which we extend with the term of culture print-centric, to a digital society based on non-sequential text, i.e., hypertext, with all the lack of intellectual/physical links which the reader makes by virtue of lexias or nodes provided by the author. In this regard, I must emphasize the “relative freedom” that the receiver or reader has, contrary to what is usually defended when composing the final text, because browsing is absolutely conditional upon the creative decisions of the writer-emitter.

Accordingly, we can describe the analogue message as “linear reading”, as opposed to digital message, characterised by an ergodic reading, that is, a reading that is required and presupposes active work by the receiver<sup>1</sup>. However, not only the sender and receiver, but also message code and channel have changed, if we take as the basis of description the existing commu-

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<sup>1</sup> The term “ergodic literature” was proposed by Espen Aarseth as follows: “The performance of the reader is produced entirely in his head, while the cybertext user also acts through an extranoematic sense. During the cybertextual process, the user will have made a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that is not described in the various concepts of ‘reading’. This phenomenon I call “ergodic”. It therefore refers to a type of reading that requires active and conscientious work by the reader (see Aarseth 2004, 118-119).

nication model in our lecture rooms, which is none other than that which Roman Jakobson proposed in 1958. Associated with this model is the study of language features which, we remember, would be the *expressive function*, a characteristic of the message; the *emotional*, a characteristic of the emitter, indicating their interests, passions, etc.; the *appellative*, or characteristic of the receiver; the metalinguistic, characteristic of the code; the *phatic*, characteristic of the channel and the *poetic*, characteristic of the message itself. It is precisely the will of the relationship of Linguistics with Literature, and Poetics that led Jakobson to write his essay *Linguistics and Poetics* to which we referred earlier.

Among the many changes that occur in this new communication model, one of which relates to the sociolinguistic springs that run through the relationship between sender and receiver. We consider that we have defined the telematic space as a true social and communicative space where social relations between speaker and listener are verified, especially if the text type that occurs in the receiver presupposes a strong commitment in building the final text, in other words, they are invited or allowed to complete the discourse with more discourse, for example in the commentary from the press, on blogs, wikis or social networks. To carry out our study and place our proposal, we rely on the theoretical analysis model proposed by M.A.K. Halliday known as Systemic Functional Linguistics, which bases its study of the language both in its system aspect (i.e. language as an ideal entity, generally non specific, common to all speakers of a language), and speaking aspect, that is, the particular embodiments of this ideal language are performed by each of the speakers or individual users of the language. Somehow, this model breaks the current dichotomy from Saussure of the separation of both concepts that, although closely related, worked separately when being studied. Well, what Halliday roughly proposes is the study of language as a system, but also of the functions arising from its use. How the language appears is not so interesting, but its function is, i.e., it is detached from the formalist vision. This means that it departs from any theory based solely on the analysis of grammatical structures and the construction of a formal model based on this language. In contrast, according to the functionalist view, every linguistic study must start from the main purpose in the use of the language, that is, communication, so that the basic issue is to verify how individuals of a particular language communicate, what it involves to study not only those forms mentioned above, but also the communicative situation that occurs in messages, i.e. the event, participants and communicative context. In the case of use of such telematic networks, we believe it is also necessary to study the social behaviour of

language and provide a linguistic theory that explains it. The proper use of language as a social instrument provides for the implementation of a number of functions that are previously known by users before starting any communication process. Indeed, knowledge and analysis of these metafunctions that we will explain derive from our theory about the expanded use of language in virtual environments, that is, with the use of hypertext.

According to the basic assumptions of the Halliday's theory, we build messages with respect to the language function they are to perform. Thus, if it is about objective, descriptive, explanatory messages, the speaker selects neutral linguistic structures, such as using the logical order of the sentence elements, the target tone, coordination and juxtaposition rather than subordination, etc. We would be, in this case, faced with the ideational metafunction. On the contrary, if it comes to interacting with others, linguistic mechanisms that would be employed would be the use of the imperative or subjunctive, interrogative and exclamatory sentences, the use of subordination, especially in conditional sentences, concessive, etc. This would be ideational metafunction. Finally, if we need to highlight information, refer to what has been said or bring forward what we will explain later, if we make all the information to be known or, on the contrary, we would like to leave implicit parts, then we alter the logical order the phrase or we use cataphoric or anaphoric pronouns, we use metaphors, connotative rather than denotative meanings or we simply use ellipsis. Then we would be faced with the textual metafunction.

### 3. THE ELECTRONIC DISCOURSE

Our intention, therefore, is to describe electronic discourse by virtue of the situation in which it occurs, which implies putting it in relation to registration, that is, according to the field, mode and tenor which characterise its production. In order to properly focus our proposals in this regard, we try to explain in more detail the meaning of these discursive types, guiding ourselves towards the hypertextual side.

- FIELD is related to social action, that is, the sphere of activity and the treated subject. They determine the field aspects such as terminology, the specific vocabulary of the different social areas, slang or jargon. The field or theme which a discourse contributes to the organisation of the discourse. If it is e-discourse, it would be the issue the discourse addresses, which differs

according to the actual text: opinion, journalistic, direct interaction of the participants (chats, forums, comments on the news, etc.) or literary ... All these types of text, and due to its pantextual structure may appear related for the sake of the links that the emitter or receiver will make, enabling us to find a “multi-field register”, as shown in the layout below and which would symbolise that the more links made, and more if they are basically random, the more fields would be involved in the overall construction of the text.

We could name, in this way, a new field, the multifield hypertext or hyperfield because the jumps and links that can be made from one text to another, both of different signs, on occasions we could even say they are opposites. From our point of view, and as we have explained elsewhere, the better understanding of the construction of electronic discourse, the greater expertise in decoding the message and less likelihood of getting lost in a chaotic or incoherent trail of links.

• TONE or TENOR, or the structure of roles: who is involved and the nature of the participants. It is “the situational factor that refers to people, their identity, their position and the degree of involvement that they show with their message”. This would be the differences between the uses of speech that are assumed in the interaction of these participants, depending on the particular communicative act. If we are before an e-discourse, relationships can be, as we have seen, in the presence or absence of a participant and emitter. From less to more, we could draw a line between types of texts designed as linear which have made the leap to the telematic space (blog entries, newspaper articles, topics of study, digitalised analogue literature, etc.) even purely electronic texts, that is, those born with an active and participatory vocation among the different participants in the process of communication (wikis or collaborative writings, comments on blog posts, comments on newspaper reports, answers to a forum on a platform of virtual learning such as Moodle, etc.).

Apart from the varying degrees of “hypertextuality” of the texts, the tone in relations between producers/receivers need not be uniform, as often happens in actual emissions in a formal tone that prevails in scientific texts, for example, while an informal tone is reserved and not prepared for the dialogic text, particularly of a familiar character. In hypertext, we can find uses of various and even disparate tones in forums, chats or comments in the news media, which assumes a formal tenor. We would talk therefore of a multitenor record because of this convergence and coexistence of input from different users, in addition to its ability and expertise to change the registration if deemed necessary (*Fig. 3*).

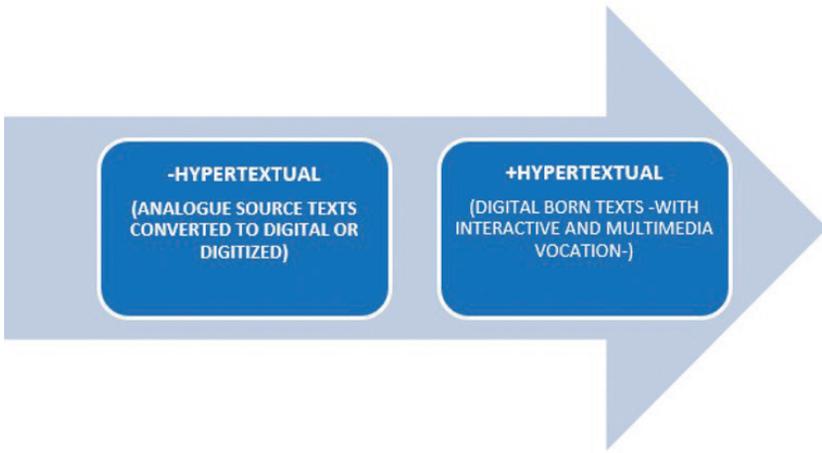
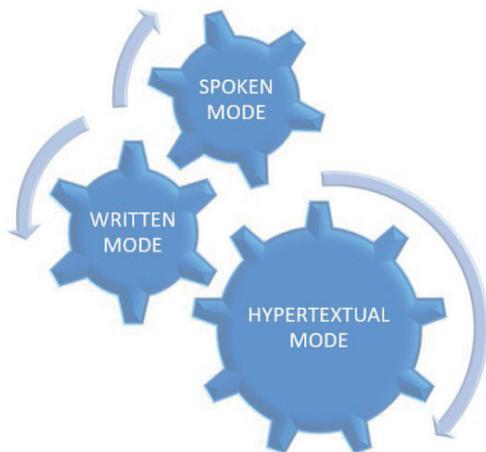


Figure 3. – Hypertext multitenor scheme.

• MODE, or symbolic organisation. It is the situational factor that refers to the various forms of channelling or transmission of a message. As we have seen, one of the most obvious linguistic changes that occurred over the digital age is relative to the channel and our use of it. Therefore, the mode of speech traditionally has been defined as verbal and written, when it is a fact that we have to procure an unquestionable formal adherence: the hypertextual mode, which works sometimes as purely written, other times imitating oral mode and, in most cases, as a special mixture of both. In this mode, there will be a clear difference between the more or less active texts, because depending on its genetic nature, it will get more or less action from the emitter, the receiver of the message or all of them. In hypertextual literary works, for example, we can also study the mode of discourse depending on the degree of participation allowed by the author and the feedback provided for each of the parts or chapters of the respective works. In outline, we could explain the discursive mode in the following way (*Fig. 4*).

As in previous cases, we would also have here a multimodal or hypermodal space, if we understand that you can combine text, audio (music, voice) and image, and static and moving, and that it will also depend on the willingness of use of the emitter and the responsive capacity of the listener.



*Figure 4. – Hypertext multimodal scheme.*

From the observation of these extremes, we understand that the hypertextual linguistic products are not exempt from being explained by observing the parameters set, coinciding with three circumstances in all e-discourse: those which are properly discursive or derived from the process of textual composition, those relating to the mode of discourse, or their oral and written aspects, and those geared towards the social dimension, that is, those who contemplate the role of the participants in the communicative act. Careful observation of these three theoretical expressions in the hypertextual developments enables us to think about the existence of two types of electronic speech, namely:

1. Free-speech and construction, derived from a passive conception of hypertext. It would consist of linking, by the receiver, of an undetermined number of sites, created and conceived as expository by an equally unknown number of authors. This would be a kind of infinite text of existing texts on the web, in which the receiver acts as the collector and organiser of ideas and goes along gluing his free will, seeking a kind of textual collage, with more or less meaning and more or less success, depending on their skill in the electronic environment, their cultural background and the objectives already identified at the time of performing the search. This type of construction would respond to the well-known characterisation of

“the dangers of the Internet”. We will try to explain what they are about and how they might be resolved.

2. Spontaneous construction of e-discourse, derived from a current conception of hypertext. Fruit of receptor engagement in open opinion sites (wikis, academic or forums, chats, comments, blogs). It would result in texts created and conceived as a fusion between the exhibition and dialogic. It would be the infinite and unfinished text of the network, in which the receptor acts as a true “bearer of ideas”, i.e. emitter that interacts with the message and with the emitter, helping to change the model of classic communication, as previously seen.

Everything previously explained, as applied in the original model, that is, oral and written discourse, must also serve as the description of hypertextual communication, which, as we have seen, represents a break in the typical linearity of oral and written text. But not only this, with this discourse we are facing a new kind of closeness that does not end with physical presence, but that opens, enlarges and expands into a non-physical but virtual proximity. Such virtual proximity is guaranteed by the knowledge and awareness of adaptation to this new space, perhaps tacitly or intuitive, but certainly shared by all participants and factors of the communicative process, who have accepted their new role, and act consequently depending on it. What has happened is that we have adapted, more or less naturally, to a new social space, where new socio-linguistic relationships between users have developed which may be based on the traditional, but are not exactly those or at least do not work the same way. The typical form of communication of electronic discourse, which, as explained, is based on the breakdown of linear discourse, the metafunctions which we have just described become hyperfunctions or multifunctions for the multimodal essence of hypertextual discourse itself. Thus, we can speak of the multi-field register, or *hyperfield*; multitenor registration or *hypertenor*; and multimodal register, or *hypermodal* or perhaps and simply hypertextual.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

With this work we wanted to present new perspectives of analysis and treatment of sociolinguistic relationships applied to electronic discourse. From our point of view, the expert knowledge of these mechanisms will lead to the expert use of new media, which will help ensure the effectiveness of the transmission of knowledge which is, in short, what our job is all about.

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