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Authors: Goldman, S. R., McCarthy, K., & Burkett, C.

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Abstract

This chapter addresses the kinds of inferences that are made when people adopt an interpretive stance (cf. Langer, 2010) toward text. This contrasts with adopting a literal stance that orients readers to constructing what the text *says* based on the propositions and connections among them in the text, using prior knowledge to the extent necessary to create a coherent representation of the situation referenced by the text. An interpretive stance orients readers to what the text *means* beyond the situation of the specific text and depends on integrating what the text says with prior knowledge of a variety of sorts, including knowledge of motivated human action, text genres and their characteristics, plot structures, character types, moral and philosophical systems, and pragmatic aspects of the communicative event.

This chapter considers the kinds of inferences and processes involved in taking an interpretive stance and the representations that result from them. In the first section, we discuss comprehension processes and the inferences involved in constructing mental representations of what a text says as well as what it means. In the second section, we review research that describes the ways in which literary experts make sense of texts and how their approaches contrast to those of novices. We highlight the types of knowledge that come into play in adopting an interpretive stance. The third section reports on two studies that we have conducted as exploratory investigations into the circumstances that promote an interpretive stance in literary novices. These studies suggest that explicit direction toward interpretive aspects of literature increases the likelihood that literary novices provide evidence of having adopted an interpretive stance. They tend not to do so with general “read-to-understand” instructions. In the concluding section, we discuss ways in which existing models of comprehension and representations of texts need to be expanded to more appropriately and completely account for the processing implied in an interpretive stance toward text and the representations that result.

Implications

Novice readers of literature need to be made more aware of the when, how, and why of adopting an interpretive stance toward the texts they read in formal contexts of schooling. Interpretive processes they use on a regular basis in everyday life may serve as a stepping-stone into the norms and practices of the literary community.

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