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Gestalt, Grice, Riley, Parker, Kostelnick, and Dummies

The attached image is page 18 from *Microsoft Word 2010 for Dummies*, by Dan Gookin. This image illustrates how visual design can be used to enhance and emphasize the rhetorical impact presented in the accompanying textual content. In this case, the visual design reinforces the accessible, whimsical, and task-driven rhetoric of the textual content which aims to assist novice users of Microsoft Word.

By analyzing the elements of this design according to Gestalt principles in the context of Grice's conversational implicature, I will show that the overall rhetorical effect is ideal for the audience for whom this page was designed.

To provide context for the visual design analysis, we must first take a close look at the textual discourse and its rhetorical effect. There are three linguistically-related elements in this content that warrant analysis: how many times the reader is required to "fill-in" information, the context that might illuminate a perceptual difference in what the text intends and what the reader perceives, and the style, or the "voice" of the content.

Before we can dig into the analysis, it's worth noting that the audience for this excerpt from *Microsoft Word 2010 for Dummies* is the novice user. According to the Introduction, the author assumes his readers are generally familiar with computers, but he does not assume that they have used any version of Word before (Gookin 3).

The first textual element to identify in the Dummy excerpt is how much it relies on the reader to fill in gaps, which can be referred to as implicature. David Wright, in his analysis of implicature in another Dummie title, provides a useful definition:

Implicature, as described by Grice, is that part of the meaning of a sentence or text that is left to be filled in by the reader. In other words, that part of the meaning of our words that is left to the reader on the basis of our contextual situation and mutual understanding of the goals of our conversation (28).

As Wright demonstrates in his article, we can determine where implicature might be required by a novice user. To do so, I counted “the number of times the reader is required to ‘fill in’ information in accordance with the Gricean maxims” (36). If a given utterance or phrase requires some Microsoft Word-specific knowledge, then I considered the phrase to require implicature. If the phrase was not technical in nature, or if the phrase relied on generic computer knowledge, then I excluded it from the implicature analysis.

The only case of implicature that I found was in this sentence, “(j)ust as there are many ways to start Word, there are several ways to quit” (18). In the context of this single page, the novice user is not aware of the “many ways to start Word.” A single case of implicature suggests a highly task- or user-focused discourse.

In another analysis of implicature, we can describe how the content succeeds at drawing analogies for which the novice user can apply their background knowledge. In other words, how well does the content respect and draw upon the context of the user’s situation as a novice?

The content provides numerous examples where the context of the user, one who is distinctly not technical, is respected. The rhetorical effect is one of accessibility. For example, to distinguish quitting Word from minimizing or restarting it, Gookin writes, “(q)uitting a computer program is like putting away a book on a shelf.”

Or, after explaining a jarring behavior when a “(t)he Word screen is unexpectedly replaced by the File tab menu screen,” he reassures, “(d)o not be alarmed.”

In both cases, Gookin respects the context of the situation of the novice user. In the first case, he makes a simple analogy to illustrate a fairly nuanced distinction between states of Microsoft Word and states in which a given Word document can exist. In the second case, he

anticipates the fear a novice user may experience when encountering an unexpected software behavior. By respecting and acting upon the context of the user situation, Gookin creates a rhetorical effect of accessibility through disambiguation. In Gricean terms, we see the maxim of manner at work here.

The last textual element to explore is one of style. A cursory look at the stylistic use of language shows an informal, whimsical tone used throughout. The first (and longest) paragraph on the page contains no direct technical content related to the task of shutting down Word. Instead, the opening paragraph provides a glib discourse on “how to excuse oneself.” At first glance, this would appear to violate Grice’s maxim of quantity, where the reader is given more than they need for efficient discourse. Perhaps, but the violation of the maxim of quantity is overshadowed by the effect that is put to use here: Grice’s maxim of relation.

Gookin uses the maxim of relation to motivate the reader through discourse towards the task. He does this by associating the well-understood social protocol of “exusing oneself” to the technical task at hand, which also requires the reader to follow a proper protocol. Using a whimsical style to implement the maxim of relation, Gookin puts the novice user at ease by drawing them into a common context before proceeding to the technical corollary.

And for the user that does not want to read the whimsical banter, the visual design of the page makes it clear that the action starts at the next heading, “To quit Word.” In the following sections, I will show how elements of the visual design introduce, enhance, and reinforce the accessible, whimsical, and task-driven rhetorical effect of the discourse discussed thus far.

Perhaps the most striking visual element of the design is the display font used for the page numbering, section heading, and task heading. The font persona is clearly out of place in technical content. In our instant recognition of the cartoonish nature of the font, we are validating Charles Kostelnick’s concept of cultural context, that “pictures are imbued with a certain cultural knowledge that reflects the shared experience of viewers at a certain historical moment” (247). Perhaps more acutely, what this font persona is doing is purposely flying in the

face of the conventional context. And while it may do so stylistically, for the immediate effect of reinforcing the accessible and whimsical rhetorical textual discourse, the font elements more powerfully reinforce the ultimate rhetorical purpose: to efficiently lead the reader towards the task they've come here for. The Gestalt principle of constancy is well executed in use of the font: by maintaining the font style and varying the size across section and task headings a hierarchy of information emerges. Constancy of font provides stability: that information under these similar visual elements is related subordinately. This stability reinforces the accessibility of the content.

The "save" dialog box is shown at the bottom of the page. The Gestalt principles of figure/ground, closure, and continuity are all deployed to emphasize the most important technical message of the task: there is risk of data loss if you perform this task incorrectly. Figure/ground is achieved just by placing a graphic against the ample negative space on the bottom of the page. The bars that frame the callout perform double-duty: they enclose the call out, but the continuity of the lines also encloses the dialog box. It's noteworthy that an explicit warning about data loss is not required anywhere in the textual discourse. The discourse introducing the graphic, instead, pulls the user into a shared context of campy intimacy, "(t)he only time Word doesn't vanish is during that shameful circumstance when you have unsaved documents." Again, we see Gricean principles at work here, but we also see Kostelnick's context of situation to set the expectation that a decision is required of the user. The combined effect of the visual and textual elements provide a simple, but impactful message in an appropriate way: be sure you save your work before you quit Word.

As for the body text of the page, the design makes use of closure to reinforce both the accessible and task-driven nature of the discourse. The design uses negative space to create closure around the body text content; the entirety of the task is enclosed by the sharp definition of white space. This effect is reinforced by the continuity of the distinct vertical line of the left-justified text, further framed (closure) by the main heading above and the callout/graphic

elements below. The use of closure reinforces the task-driven purpose of the design; users interpret all the partial elements enclosed into a purposeful whole. By embedding the procedure into another enclosed area while taking advantage of the hierarchy (as discussed, constancy - provided by the headings), and the emphasis provided by figure/ground bolding of procedure statements, the design provides an efficient path for the reader looking for the meat of the task.

According to Gestalt theory of closure, users tend to view enclosed items as complete. By enclosing the entirety of the task into a single visual element of content, the task is at once accessible and complete.

I've argued that the document design of this Dummy page works well for the intended user. One way to test my hypothesis would be to imagine changes to specific elements. I believe the strength, ultimately, of this content relies on textual implicature. If the discourse in this document followed a model that relied on high use of reader implicature, the entire design would fall apart. Imagine content that assumed the reader had been reading the document as a linear work, or that assumed the reader was comfortable with distinctions between various states of Word and documents. In this context, the "whimsical" style of discourse and the cartoonish headings would violate Riley and Parker's meta-principles of clarity and completeness by imposing a dissonant set of signals for the reader to resolve (180).

A change that is more difficult to analyze would be a change to the headings. What if the headings used a more traditional non-serif text typeface? Such a change would still maintain what I argue is the most important function of providing hierarchy: ultimately the users need to be guided to complete the task. If, as I've argued, the rhetorical effects of accessibility and whimsicality are achieved through interplay of Kostlenick's contexts of culture and convention as we perceive these headings, then how would the analysis of context change with a more traditional text typeface? Unlike the existing typeface, a traditional text typeface would certainly validate the conventional context that we expect to see in technical documentation. And while I don't believe such a type would violate any principles by specifically conflicting with the whimsy

and accessibility present elsewhere in the document, a traditional text typeface certainly wouldn't underscore or emphasize the accessibility of this document, which is a critical rhetorical feature of its overall success.

In the end, the design is an intentional implementation that illustrates the validity of Gricean and Gestalt principles, Kostelnick's contexts of visual perception, and Riley and Parker's meta-principles of visual and textual processing.

Works Cited

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18 Part I: Your Introduction to Word

Ending Your Word Processing Day

It's the pinnacle of etiquette to know when and how to excuse oneself. Leaving can be done well or poorly. For example, the phrase "Well, I must be off," works lots better than "Something more interesting must be happening somewhere else" — especially at Thanksgiving.

Just as there are many ways to start Word, there are several ways to quit. You can quit the program outright, you can pause and start over, or you can set Word aside. These options are covered in the following sections.

To quit Word

When you're done word processing and you don't expect to return to it anytime soon, you can quit the Word program. Quitting a computer program is like putting away a book on a shelf. In the electronic world of the computer, this is how you do such a thing:

1. Click the File tab.

The Word screen is replaced by the File tab menu screen. Do not be alarmed.

2. Choose the Exit command.

Word vanishes from the screen.

The only time Word doesn't vanish is during that shameful circumstance when you have unsaved documents. If so, you're prompted to save the document, as shown in Figure 1-3. My advice is to click the Save button to save your work.

Figure 1-3:
Better click
that Save
button!

