

Musings on “Scollonese” and a Medley of Texts by Ron and Suzie Scollon

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When I work, there is often one of Ron and Suzie’s Scollon books or articles lying around my apartment. They are books and articles I keep coming back to. Why is it ? For one thing, they are books with a voice and reading them is like entering again a conversation with their authors. That voice is warm and inviting—sharply intelligent and humorous too. They are also books that keep on giving. They do not lend themselves well to quick summarizing. You cannot just close them thinking « ok, I’ve got the point ». They are books that are generously replete with *many* points and paths for further inquiry. They are books that kind of answer back to you: What is your own idea on this ? How could you research this topic ? They set you in motion.

How is this accomplished ? If Scollonese was a textual genre, what would be some of its recurring features or ingredients ?

The text might very well start from experience—and from “ a process of trying to be true to that experience and find a theory that does not violate it ” (Elbow, 2000 : 63). The experience is often a simple one and might involve a bit of narrative—buying a cup of coffee at Starbucks (Scollon, 2001), handing a bill in Honk Hong (Scollon, 1997), lighting a stove (Scollon & Scollon, 2005), nailing a floor (Scollon, 2005b), etc. The goal is to allow the ideas discussed to live in some contextually rich environment. Then, the authors invite us to engage in a process of seeing more complexity and contradiction in this experience. This can include, for example, analyzing it in more details so that it has more than two sides (Scollon, 2008), opening up the circumference of analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) so that we look at it from a different timescale, changing point of view (Scollon, 2002), etc. It can also include mobilizing categories and concepts, from a vast array of fields in the social sciences—Eastern and Western—and beyond, to sort through different aspects of that experience or social reality. The point is always to get away from simple and single truths and to create instead a situation of imbalance, irresolution and nonclosure. Beyond, the authors often manage to get you to see that maybe even that more complex reality is not the whole story. At this point, as a reader, you might need to alter the very meanings you brought to the reading of the text in the first place. Your perspective has now changed, precipitating new thinking and perhaps new action. It is hard indeed to have understood or discovered something and not do anything with it. It is hard not getting puzzled or enthused reading an article by Ron and Suzie Scollon as their wide audience shows.

What is my favorite piece by them ? It is difficult for me to single just one of them. There are probably five or six texts I regularly come back to : *Nexus Analysis* (2001); *Ethnography of motives* (2002a) ; *What’s the point ? Can Mediated Discourse Analysis Stop the War ?* (2002b) *The construction of agency and action in anticipatory discourse: positioning ourselves against neo-liberalism ?* (2000) ; *Analyzing public discourse* (2008) ; *Discourses in places : language in the material world* (2003). Several of these texts share the common property of including fieldguides in their midst, or tips for observations. They do not just debate about theoretical issues. They provide you with activities for identifying some social issue and get into meaningful action about it. They give you resources for *doing* it. These resources are “not a set of rules, but a set of tools” readers may choose to use

according to the specifics of the occasion and in any way they want (Scollon & Scollon, 1986), in a spirit of freedom and discovery. Of all the titles that include such a practical outlook, I have a particular fondness for a small book written about 25 years ago, largely out-of-print, published by The Black Current Press, Haines, Alaska, and entitled *Responsive Communication : Patterns for making sense* (1986). It is this book I would like to discuss more in detail in closing. The point of departure of the book is that we live in a society where we talk much, but we have not learned to always listen well. In that context, *Responsive Communication* purports to “distill the essential communication patterns you need in order to become a better listener” as the introduction states (p.2). The book lays out fifty ways or patterns for transforming the way you communicate and relate to others by transforming the way you respond to them. The patterns are built on research literature drawn from linguistics, anthropology, psychology or management, and the book is a model of how research results and outcomes can be translated for a wider audience. A guiding section explains how to use the patterns to improve responsibility in the situation of interest to the reader, whether s/he is seeking to improve communication in an organizational setting or in interpersonal encounters, or to engage in personal development. What makes me particularly like this book is that Ron did not just carry the research to identify what could be features of more responsive communication. He also exerted the kind of listening and responsive communication he and Suzie advocate in this book. Whomever has shared conversations with him experienced that fabulous quality of listening—a form of listening connecting you with your own power. This book lays out a path for working on creating that relation with others. It is not just a text, it is a practical guide for engaging in a process of becoming more respectful of oneself and of others. The five last patterns read : “Tell stories – Joke – Exercise – Watch your diet – Cultivate your own humanity – Enjoy the humanity of others ”. I am grateful for Ron’s vital warmth and for each exchange and every conversation shared. I am grateful for his commitment to responsive communication. Walking in his steps, I too will try to “cultivate friends unlike myself”, “learn from others”, “not worry as much about my image as about my human identity”, “pause”, “hedge”, “do creative wandering”, “listen to accents” and “begin with small differences”.

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