



## Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

---

Volume 23 | Issue 1

Article 11

---

4-1-1997

### *Supposition Error: A Noevel: Minute Linguistic Structure Magnified through the Literary Looking Glass*

Alan Manning

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls>

---

#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Manning, Alan (1997) "*Supposition Error: A Noevel: Minute Linguistic Structure Magnified through the Literary Looking Glass*," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol23/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# ***Supposition Error: A Novel: Minute Linguistic Structure Magnified through the Literary Looking Glass***

Alan Manning  
Brigham Young University

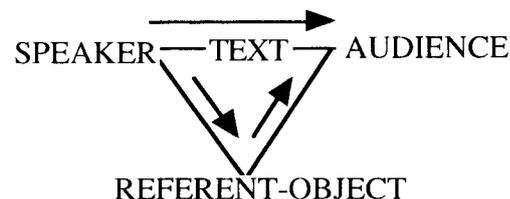
Ketner (1995) proposes that the novel be conceived as “a large sign, a triadic relational pattern on a large scale, that can be a tool in diagrammatic thought . . . used to model, by mental diagrams, some other relations that are not as well understood” (p. 279). Following the work of the late Walker Percy, Ketner argues that using the novel as analytic model may prove the salvation of the human and social sciences, where dualistic cause-effect models from the hard sciences have largely failed to illuminate human motivations and behaviors.

I wrote *Supposition Error: A novel* partly out of my desire to illustrate the dynamics of Peircean semiotics in a student-friendly format and partly from the need to test a theoretical prediction about the differential acquisition of writing genres. In this essay, I will review these theoretical underpinnings and report on (very) preliminary results of these two aspects of the ongoing *Supposition Error* experiment: First, as evidence for a genre-sensitive theory of writing acquisition and second, my classroom use of the book as a primer in Peircean theory.

## **A Test of a Writing-Acquisition Theory**

I begin with a brief summary of my early findings in writing acquisition research (Manning, 1994), which I would first put to the test in writing *Supposition Error*. Timothy Crusius (1989) had noted that an adequate discourse theory should predict/explain a learning sequence among different types of writing

(p. 110). Construction of such a theory is the main object of Britton et al.’s influential *Development of Writing Abilities*, a mainly empirical study of writing samples from students age 11 to 18. Britton (following Moffet) uses a variation on Kinneavy’s speaker/hearer/referent triangle to explain the findings, but the “triangle” turns out not sophisticated enough to describe several aspects of Britton’s empirical findings, let alone explain them.



**Figure 1**

Britton’s model (83) suggests that acquisition of mature writing skills consists of gradual replacement of expressive speech-based forms (e.g., instructor as audience, concrete topics, heavily context dependent), with forms unique to writing (e.g., generalized audience, abstract topics, independent of immediate context). Development should *simultaneously* proceed from consistently expressive writing towards *both* mature poetic (literary) and mature transactional (persuasive and referential) writing. However, actual empirical findings of Britton’s study (in samples of

English curriculum writing) are summarized as follows:

. . . the first three age levels of the sample [are] characterized by . . . moderate use of expressive and extensive use of poetic writing. However, there is some increase in transactional writing in the fifth year, and a sharp change in the seventh marked by an increase in analogic [technical] writing and a decisive entry of writing at a theoretical (speculative/tautologic) level; also in the seventh year, poetic writing diminishes radically. (169)

In short, writing skills appear to evolve NOT from the expressive, but from the poetic (literary) through the transactional (i.e., first business, then technical writing), with "theoretical" (i.e., scientific/academic) writing developing last. This developmental sequence in student writing surely has its parallel in the professional writing market; the greatest volume is in quite readable literary prose fiction (thousands of new novels and TV/film scripts every year). The next, most commonly encountered form is persuasion-oriented business writing, much of it reaching us in the form of sales letters (junk-mail), which are also quite readable but somewhat irritating for their specific and dubious claims (You MUST buy . . .). Most of us encounter true technical writing less often, usually in the form of instructions, in which competence is more rare, their generally low readability proverbial. Rarest of all are those truly competent, readable pieces of academic/scientific prose making some specific and convincing claim based on carefully evaluated evidence (as opposed to the "easy" narrative and emotional appeals typical in business writing).

These observations are NOT accommodated by the Kinneavy-Moffett-Britton discourse triangle, which has its roots in a behaviorist-positivist misreading (by Charles Morris) of C. S. Peirce's original three-part semiotic theory. Ironically enough, Peirce's original theory explains fully the entire sequence that Britton discovered empirically but couldn't explain with his corrupted model. C. S. Peirce's original system, wherein Peirce's fundamental categories are named according to the order in which they develop perceptually: **FIRSTS** (qualities and indefinite reference), **SECONDS** (indexical claims about specific objects), and **THIRDS** (interpretive synthesis). The style/organization parameters which define literary writing (**QUALITATIVE & DIVERSE CLAIM**) are

iconic, and thus Peircean **FIRSTS**; the parameters which define academic writing (**EVALUATIVE & FOCUSED CLAIM**) are the first and second degrees of Peircean **THIRDNESS**. The developmental sequence of writing types falls out when these parameters develop in Peirce's logical sequence:

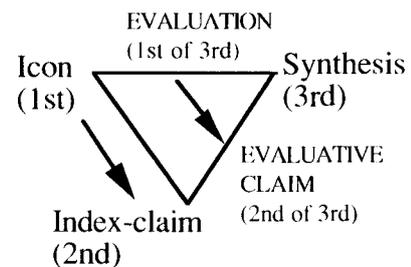
*Literary*: Qualitative and Diverse Claim (1st, 1st)

*Business*: Qualitative-Indexical Claim (1st, 2nd)

*Technical*: Diverse Claim and Evaluative (1st, 1st of 3rd)

*Academic*: Evaluative-Indexical Claim (1st of 3rd, 2nd of 3rd)

Figure 2



Thus, in classical linguistic terms, academic/scientific writing is the most-marked member in the hierarchy (2nd of 3rd) and is the latest, rarest competence to develop (if it ever does). Literary writing is the least-marked member in the hierarchy (1st and 1st) and is the earliest, most common competence to develop (if it ever does). By analogy, across languages and in language acquisition, the vowel sounds /e/ and /o/ are more marked than the vowel sound /a/. Any languages and/or children learning a language that make productive use of /e/ and /o/ sounds always have an /a/ sound within their linguistic competence.

The prediction follows, again by classical markedness theory, that anyone with a genuine competence in academic or technical writing should implicitly possess some significant literary competence, even if they have never written anything particularly literary. Note that the converse is not true: just as the use of /a/ in a language does not imply that /e/ or /o/ sounds have phonemic value in that language, likewise a person's well-developed literary skills do not imply that he or she could write coherent and readable technical instructions, or make a compelling academic argument.

Once I'd formulated this Peircean analysis of writing-skills development, I felt committed to the project of testing this most obvious empirical prediction. As of 1993 (when I first developed this

analysis) I had 12 refereed articles in various academic journals. On the other hand, since my eighth-grade English class I'd never written anything "creative" or had any creative writing instruction. This made me the perfect candidate: according to any standard writing theory, I should not demonstrate any significant literary skill at all. And so, with only my own leisure-time reading of fiction as guide, I sat down and in a couple of weeks wrote a short story called "Imprint"; I then showed it to one of my creative-writing colleagues in the English department at Idaho State. His response was that, although he found my basic narrative style sound and the story's premise interesting, his impression was that I had outgrown (!) the short-story format: I had introduced too many characters and a plotline too complex to be handled in anything less than a novel-length treatment. Taking that as a promising sign, I then began the novel that became *Supposition Error*.

By the end of 1993 I'd written the first four chapters. Then I (finally!) began to wonder if my whole theory of writing acquisition might be wrong. . . . Not wanting this multiyear project to be a total waste of time, I decided then to hedge my bets a little and to work out a second purpose for the book, if it turned out to be not such a great piece of literature. For some years I'd been trying to teach my students about Peirce's semiotic theories, but not with great success. Peirce's own philosophical writing is not particularly easy to follow and most writers commenting on his work are even less clear than Peirce himself. One thing I was sure of, most students would prefer reading even a poorly written novel to reading another poorly written academic text on Peirce. (Many students seem to prefer having a leg broken to reading academic texts of ANY kind.) It occurred to me then that I might work up some concrete illustrations of Peirce's theories of meaning in the novel itself, making it into a kind of "primer" for Peirce's theories. Since it was Peirce's fault that I was writing this book at all, this seemed appropriate and poetic justice.

### A Primer in Peircean Linguistics

To adequately illustrate what I accomplish with *Supposition Error* as a literary treatment of Peirce, I must now subject readers to a (mercifully brief) academic discussion of part of his semiotics. I make considerable use of Peirce's ten-part division of sign-types (2: 254–263) in my "Language, Mind and World" class at Brigham

Young University (Linguistics 230). His system gets emphasis precisely because Peirce's classification makes clear the essential differences between human language and animal communication on one hand, and the relationship between language and the basic organization of the human brain on the other. In brief, animals and humans both may make use of sign-types I–VII, but the types VIII, IX, X represent the three key aspects of that uniquely human communication mode called language.

### Peirce's Ten Classes of Signs

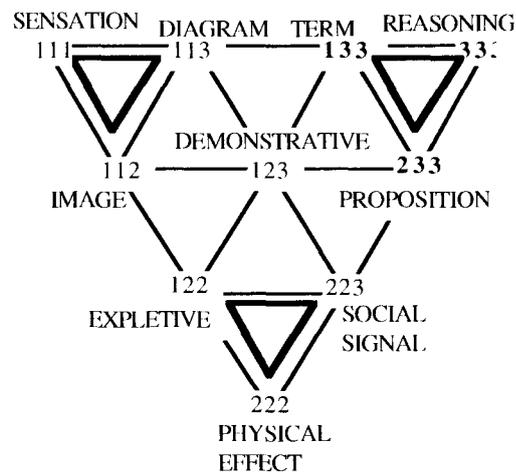


Figure 3

In Peirce's diagram, the top left subtriangle (I, II, V) is just that group of signs designated as ICONIC; the top right subtriangle, (VIII, IX, X) is just that group of signs called SYMBOLIC; finally, the bottom subtriangle plus demonstratives (III, IV, VI, VII) is that group of signs called INDEXICAL. Scholars are generally aware of the distinction between icon, index, and symbol, but generally ignorant of the important subdivisions within these three supercategories of sign. There are volumes to be spoken about Peirce's Ten Classes of Sign, but I will restrict myself to points that I have emphasized in my introductory linguistics course and reinforced with literary scenes from *Supposition Error*. It turns out that Peirce's Ten-class diagram is a fair representation of the neurological distribution of signal-interpretation in people with "normal" brain function, that is to say, "normal" left-hemisphere and right-hemisphere specialization and "normal" frontal-posterior lobe specialization.

### Peirce's Ten Classes as Map of General Brain Function

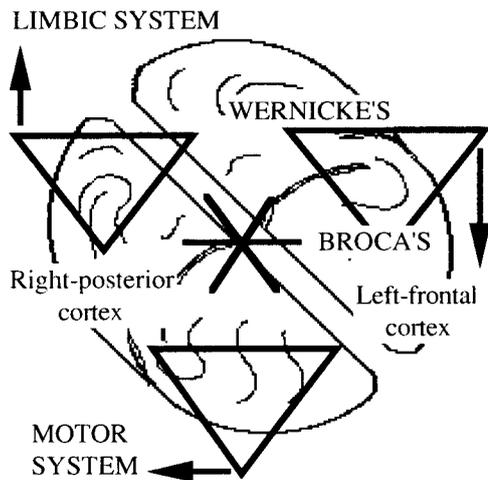


Figure 4

Thus, an anatomical interpretation of Peirce's categories neatly explains how brain-damaged persons may suffer significant damage to some "core" linguistic functions, but not others. For example, people with "Wernicke's Aphasia" lose the ability to correctly interpret or articulate lexical items (TERMS-VIII), but they can still formulate grammatical (though nonsensical) sentences. Persons with "Broca's Aphasia" lose ability to correctly interpret or articulate syntactic structures (PROPOSITIONS-IX) but still are able to understand TERMS or use some language pragmatically (VII) as a system of SOCIAL SIGNALS (Smith, 1990: 167-177).

Most patients with left-hemispheric damage, furthermore, are still able to curse eloquently (i.e., utter EXPLETIVES—type III in the Peircean system). Even in the absence of specific lexical and syntactic analysis, the patient with Broca's or Wernicke's aphasia may still have sufficient frontal-lobe capacity to draw reasonable inferences (X) and direct appropriate social actions (VI, IV). Conversely, the Peircean model predicts/explains how patients with right-hemispheric damage may retain basic linguistic competence but lose all sense of pragmatically appropriate language, as well as the image-based metaphorical nuances (II, V) of lexical interpretation (Parker & Riley, 1994: 285).

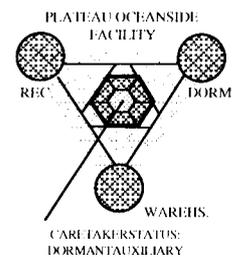
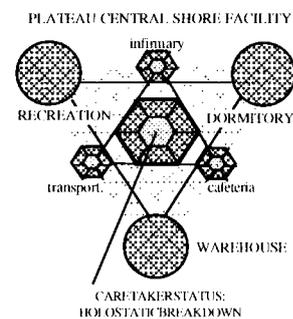
Let's consider now how the preceding academic discussion gets translated into a literary treatment. The basic premise of *Supposition Error* is this: Paul Bolton, a cynical postmodernist literature

professor finds himself (apparently) kidnapped by aliens along with his least-favorite graduate student, Dana Cooper. These two find themselves abandoned on a distant planet 278 years in the future. Here they have to learn to survive by using their wits, plus the few odd bits of future technology they manage to borrow or steal from a "shore facility," the twenty-third-century equivalent of a highway rest area. These odd bits include one artificially intelligent, artificially feminine computer named Voice. Voice proves indispensable to Paul's and Dana's survival, but a faulty programming instruction from Paul causes her system to crash. Then Paul and Dana have to figure out how to repair her. We now join their conversation, "already in progress"—

"Didn't Voice once say there was another shore facility, a branch office or something on a beach somewhere?" Dana asked. "Was it north or south of us?"

"North," I said. "About a thousand clicks, maybe an hour away if we take the airlaunch, less if we go full throttle. I was planning to go one of these days, but I assumed the facilities would be dead there too."

"Not dead—just an inactive backup," Dana said, and she sat down again at another screen and began moving through entry indices. After two months of practice she worked more quickly than I could follow. Soon she had retrieved a map of our main facility, a triangle of seven buildings,



Figures 5a & 5b

and this she set next to another map showing a shoreline and a reduced triangle of four buildings, domes smaller than ours on each corner, but a large pyramid like ours at the center. Between these two images, she superimposed a third neural-net diagram, this one mapping the architecture of a human brain.

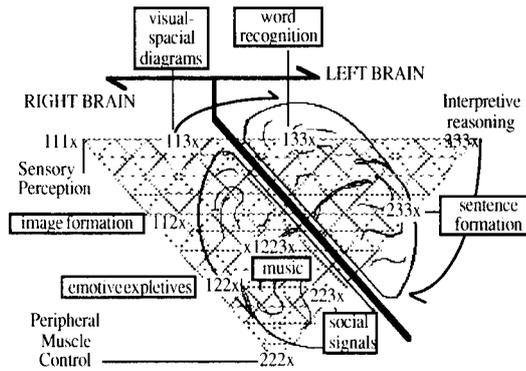


Figure 6

“She had two teeth in the middle of her mouth,” Dana quoted, “one pointed North and the other pointed South.’ Put them together, like the two halves of a human brain, and I think Voice will speak again.”

“What makes you so sure?” I had to ask.

“Well, when Voice first started to fail, she started cursing like a sailor, remember? When she woke up, she could communicate only by singing. Those are what linguists call ‘right hemisphere’ language; the right side of the brain handles profanity in most people. Saintry old women who’d faint at so much as a tinker’s ‘dam’ end up cursing a blue streak if they’re having strokes in the left side of their brain, the part that handles the grammatical, analytic part of language. In those women though, the right side of their brain still works: their artistic sense, humor, profanity and music, don’t you see? It’s what they’ll use to communicate if that’s all they have” (*Supposition Error*, 131–132).

On the heels of this conversation, the skeptical postmodernist Paul Bolton discovers, much to his dismay, that in the past 278 years the Truth-driven Realist philosophy of C.S. Peirce has been made the cornerstone of human civilization, penetrating all aspects of human culture, up to and including architecture, computer-circuit design, not to mention military psychologists’ ideas about proper command structure in a starship crew:

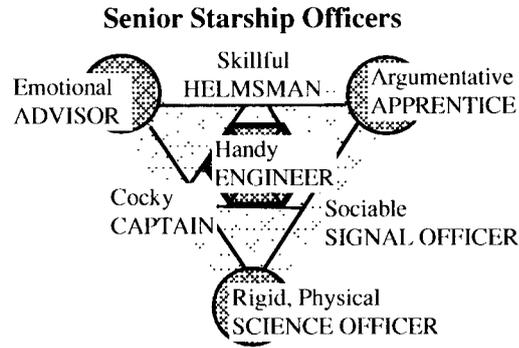


Figure 7

In such a setting, instructive situations like that shown above multiply, giving me several opportunities to illustrate Peircean principles and systematically dismantle Paul’s various misguided postmodernisms in the process.

This question remains, however: To what degree does *Supposition Error* actually succeed in the tasks I’ve laid out for it here? We will now consider the preliminary results.

### Preliminary Findings: A Primer in Peircean Linguistics

My impression is that my 230 students understand Peirce better this semester than they ever have in the past, but then again I’ve also significantly altered lectures and testing material this semester. Thus, it’s not possible (yet) to objectively compare current student’s performance with student performance from past semesters with my Peircean material. Given the low-information density of popular literature generally, with this novel I can only hope, in any case, to teach just a few basic points. On the other hand, I have accumulated some independent evidence that the novel accomplishes at least one goal: that of generating *interest* in Peirce. It is thus a “primer” in the most basic sense: pouring *a little* water into pump so that you can extract *far more* water from the well beneath. After reading the novel, people seem more loosened up, “primed,” and motivated now to confront the daunting task of reading and thinking about Peirce and his commentators in an academic context. Thus, Tom Anderson (a public-health policy analyst from Massachusetts whom I’ve never met) posted the following comment to the internet discussion list on Peirce:

I was reading Alan Manning’s novel, *SUPPOSITION ERROR*—I recommend it, but won’t

comment until I've finished it. Anyway, he makes a lot of use of Peirce's semiosis there in ways that really got me thinking about this topic, a topic I find very difficult. I was also on the alert for definitions and explanations of "symbol" as someone—I can't recall who now—posted a definition of "symbol" about a week ago that stressed the "arbitrary and conventional" (not a real quote—my memory of the remark) nature of symbols in contrast with icons and indices.

BYU colleagues and students outside the 230 course have also read *Supposition Error*. Whether they read it for information or entertainment (or to make sure that I'm not corrupting my students' morals), they consistently ask me where they can read more about Peirce. This I count as success.

#### **Preliminary Findings: A Test of a Writing-Acquisition Theory**

After my Linguistics 230 classes had read *Supposition Error*, but prior to my explaining anything about the novel, I submitted to all students anonymous, voluntary-participation surveys (in keeping with humans-subjects research guidelines). The survey asked students to rate the book by checking the assessment that most closely matched their personal response to the book as story. Out of 57 students, 43 returned survey forms, with the following results:

Assessment	Number of students agreeing
One of the best novels I've read.	2
Better than many I've read.	8
Better than some I've read.	28
Worse than many I've read.	4
One of the worst I've read.	1

Class response to the novel as story seems to be overwhelmingly NEUTRAL, but the average tends significantly to the positive side (2 to 1 for those expressing a non-neutral opinion). All in all, such results tend to confirm my hypothesis that literary genres of writing are significantly less-marked than academic writing. Remember that *Supposition Error* represents my first significant attempt at literature, with lukewarm reviews, but my first attempts at academic writing (as is usually the case with new graduate students) received

overwhelmingly NEGATIVE reviews from my mentoring professors.

This contrast in responses to my beginning efforts in each genre suggest that, in all my distinctly painful struggles in graduate school, to gradually improve my academic writing, I was actually also necessarily (but unconsciously) working over and across the foundational elements of narrative literature. For example, through the practice of narrative, writers develop skill in showing events unfold with concrete narrative detail (as in the modern novel), rather than merely telling a story as a sequence of events, rather than telling it as a list of general interpretive statements (as in a child's fairy tale). In later forms of writing, this skill likely translates into a relatively rare but valuable habit of using concrete examples to illustrate each and all general explanatory and persuasive statements.

Through the practice of story plotting, writers develop skill in looking past their writing as a linear series of sentences, to see beyond a flat list of separate events to a larger unity in what they write, the overall plot frame. In later forms of writing this framing skill likely translates into an equally rare and crucial ability to see explanations and arguments as unified, larger claims that can be revised and improved at the level of overall organization, not just tinkered with at the sentence by sentence level.

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I should now comment on the convergence of the results of both aspects of the *Supposition Error* project, as literary primer in an academic subject, and as guide to a better vision of composition instruction. This analysis suggests that, although training in literary modes, both reading and writing, will NOT guarantee success with academic reading and writing, the right kind of training in literary reading and writing may nevertheless make the transition to academic discourse far easier than currently accepted methods of academic instruction and composition teaching.

Students from the beginning are confronted with deceptively complex forms of academic writing in their reading assignments, and even when they are assigned literature to read they will also likely be assigned a "simple book report." Teachers expecting focused evaluation and criticism of a book are invariably disappointed: the report invariably turns out to be little more than a plot

summary of the book, if it is a story, and sporadic paraphrases of unrelated information if the book is an academic text. In other words, the student retells the story and not usually very well, or analyzes some academic argument not well at all, full of the same kinds of unsupported generalization and lack of organizational focus that will likely haunt their writing throughout their academic careers.

My revisionary advice to academics generally and to writing teachers particularly would be to stop fighting this natural result, to work instead to improve student's basic impulse to tell stories, full of concrete detail and carefully constructed plot organization. Do this and THEN ask them to evaluate a story by someone else. Do this and THEN ask them to evaluate an evaluative argument by someone else. Do this and THEN ask them to write an original evaluative argument of their own (i.e., the traditional research paper).

First things should come first.

## References

- Anderson, Tom <tsander@ix.netcom.com> Internet discussion: Subject: Peirce on innate ideas. Sender: peirce-l@ttacs6.ttu.edu. Date: Wed, 02 Apr 1997 09:45:52 -0600
- Britton, James N. et al. *The Development of Writing Abilities* (11–18). Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1975.
- Crusius, Timothy. *Discourse: A Critique and Synthesis of Major Theories*. New York: MLA, 1989.
- Peirce, C. S. *Collected Papers*. Ed. Hartshorne & Weiss. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935
- Ketner, Kenneth Laine. *A Thief of Peirce: The Letters of Kenneth Laine Ketner and Walker Percy*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi (1995).
- Manning, Alan. "Literary vs. Technical and Professional Writing: The Developmental Relationship." In *Rhetorical Designs for Professional and Technical Writing: A Teacher's Guide*. Ed. W. E. Tanner. Dallas: Caxton's, 1994.
- Manning, Alan. *Supposition Error: A Novel*. Superior, WI: Parlay Press, 1996.
- Parker, Frank, and Riley Kathryn. *Linguistics for Non-Linguists*. New York: Allyn & Bacon, 1994.
- Smith, Neil. *The Twitter Machine: Reflections on Language*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.