

**Discourse Respiration: The State of the Art**  
**L Barton and A H Scry**  
**Didcot Academic Press 2004. 642pp. £43.50**  
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*(BAAL Newsletter 1991)*

It is almost exactly ten years since the appearance of Pierrette Machin's seminal paper *La respiration – musique intérieur du dialogue*, and this book provides a timely overview of developments in the intervening decade.

Machin was not of course the first to pay attention to communicative aspects of breathing – one thinks, for example, of Parker's work on the sneezing language of the Ojibwa, or Sackbottle's account of the Lugardu (who resolve territorial disputes by seeing who can talk for longest without breathing in). But Machin was certainly the first to look at the matter from a discourse perspective. It is to her that we owe the now commonplace distinction between *breathing* (the physiological process whereby air is transported into and out of the lungs) and *respiration* (the procedure by which this air-flow is exploited to structure the interactive use of language). And it was Machin's realisation that all oral language use can be analysed in terms of an eight-cell matrix (generated by the intersections of the three key parameters *breathing/respiration*, *inhalation/exhalation* and *receptive/productive*) that really laid the foundations for current work in the field.

Following Machin, Slabside and Haunch did valuable work on the role of respiration in the negotiation of turn-taking, discovering, for example, that the speeding up of breathing as discourse boundaries approach seems to be a universal, and that in certain interactive contexts (they studied faculty meetings), participants appear to exploit relationships between breathing rhythm and eye movements for a variety of discourse-structuring purposes (though few would now regard Slabside and Haunch's tripartite analysis into *harmonisation*, *counterpoint* and *syncopation* as adequate).

Barton and Scry are particularly informative on recent developments, and give an admirable account of Heartsease, Gazunda and Wankfurlong's studies of 'listening respiration', in which it was shown not only that listeners tend to 'mirror' speakers' breathing rhythms, but indeed that cooperative discourse partners work mutually towards optimum harmonisation of their respiratory patterns.

The SLA implications are, as usual, unclear, and Barton and Scry make no attempt to paper over the cracks. As they recognise, while it is unwise to assume that learners can automatically transfer mother-tongue respiratory strategies *en bloc*, current theory provides no justification for the more extreme versions of the so-called 'DR' teaching approach. No doubt second-language learners will be helped by training in relaxation, interactive breathing, and so forth, and classical yoga techniques have long been known to correlate positively with the development of top-down and bottom-up processing skills. However, one wonders whether the hardware associated with the DR approach (thoracimeters, respiration counters, oxygen masks and the rest) is likely to be genuinely cost-effective for the average learner.

Barton and Scry provide a competent account of the state of the art in discourse respiration studies, and there is little that I would wish to take issue with. In the still controversial area of text respiration (the extent to which a writer composes with the reader's breathing patterns in mind), they perhaps take too uncritical a view of the Wuppertal model – it is difficult to see how one and the same analytical instrument can really apply to such disparate texts as, for example, *Wilhelm Meister's Wanderjahre* and

the Paderborn telephone directory. Again, they seem to accept, lock stock and barrel, Calloway's theory of the role of respiration in signalling cohesion; most people working today would stop short of a position which regards both breathing and not-breathing as equally significant cohesive devices, even though such a view is not without parallel in the cohesion literature. There are occasional editorial slips (Piero della Francesca died in 1492; Darwin's ship was the *Beagle*, not the *Weasel*; Nagoya is not in the Atlas Mountains; *wombat* is not spelt with double *t*). All, in all, however, this is a sound and important book which will clearly become a standard work in the field, and it can be warmly recommended.

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