Literature and Memory
Theoretical Paradigms - Genres - Functions
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Discourses of Remembering: The Construction of Recollections in Mary Kingsley’s Travels in West Africa

Travel writing is obviously of great interest for the study of memory. Not only do the accounts of travellers contribute considerably to the construction of collective memory about foreign places and the Other and to the banks of remembered information underlying the theoretical frameworks of scientific disciplines like ethnography, botany, etc, they are also interesting as regards genre and the way in which this operates as a repository of cultural memory. Mary Kingsley’s Travels in West Africa, first published in 1897, is no exception. Scholars have already explored the way in which Kingsley and other nineteenth-century women travellers have helped to rewrite ‘histories of geography’, thereby offering an alternative to the dominant imperialist narratives about Africa and other places (cf., for example, Blunt 1994; McEwan 2000). They have examined the contributions made by these women to the memory banks of science (Gates/Shteir 1997; Harper 2001), and have considered the contribution made to the genre of travel writing by these nineteenth-century women voyagers (Mills 1991; Frawley 1994; Lawrence 1994).

I, however, am less concerned here with the construction of collective memory than with the mechanisms involved in the representation of personal memories in discourse. In this respect, travel writing has much in common with autobiography, and of course a great deal has already been written about the way in which personal life accounts are shaped, and indeed constructed, by genre expectations and other considerations of a cultural or political nature. But rather than consider genre as the decisive factor, I prefer here to consider the issue of discourse, in the sense used in Critical Discourse Analysis.1 This is due to the specific nature of the text in question, which contains a clash of discourses so pronounced that it actually threatens to overspill the boundaries of the genre to which it is normally allocated. There are great swathes of text in Travels in West Africa that read like scientific papers, with all the discourse characteristics of that particular genre; other parts where the author adopts a light-hearted narrative style that is clearly designed to amuse and entertain; and still others where her voice is intimate and reflective, with features reminiscent of more private kinds of discourse, such as the diary or private letter. For this reason, the text offers an ideal

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1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is concerned above all with uncovering unconscious ideological assumptions present in discourse, and much of the work that has been done in this field has been to illuminate the way in which discourses, and indeed individual texts, enact the power struggles that are perpetually being played out between different ideological systems in society (cf. Kress/Hodge 1979; Fairclough 1989).
opportunity for the exploration of the way in which private memory is affected by the conventions governing different discourses.\textsuperscript{2}

A potentially rich field of inquiry is the author’s attitude to the ideologically charged issue of race. I am interested in exploring how her recollections of her experience of racial difference are conditioned by the different discourses she uses when recounting them. Also, like many other authors, I am curious about her own private attitudes on this issue; while we obviously do not have direct access to her intimate unconstructed thoughts, I do not consider it impossible that analysis of her discourse might in places reveal something of whether she perceived racial difference in the typically essential terms of the colonialist or if she was instead able to empathise with the natives as members of shared humanity. Finally, I will briefly touch upon the issue of the distance between the original event and the constructed memory of it, and whether this in any way determines the ideological form those perceptions will take. Edward Said, in a famous passage from \textit{Orientalism}, makes an important observation about the relationship between private perception and public discourse:

That Marx was still able to sense some fellow feeling, to identify even a little with poor Asia, suggests that something happened before the labels took over […] It is as if the individual mind (Marx’s in this case) could find a precollective, preofficial individuality in Asia – find and give in to its pressures upon his emotions, feelings, senses – only to give it up when he confronted a more formidable censor in the very vocabulary he found himself forced to employ. What that censor did was to stop and then chase away the sympathy […] The vocabulary of emotion dissipated as it submitted to the lexicographical police action of Orientalist science and even Orientalist art. An experience was dislodged by a dictionary definition (1985 [1978]: 55).

Clearly he is suggesting that some pre-linguistic individual perception may exist prior to its encoding in discourse, and that this may have the capacity to transcend the conceptual categories imposed by language. Though a controversial assertion, this is of interest here, since it may go some way to explain some of the ideological contradictions evident in Mary Kingsley’s text.

1. A clash of discourses in Kingsley’s \textit{Travels in West Africa}

The clash of discourses that is so overwhelmingly evident in \textit{Travels in West Africa} owes a great deal to the tensions that traversed the genre of travel writing in the nineteenth century. As Alison Blunt (1994: 59) has pointed out, travel writing often seemed to bridge the gulf between scientific and literary discourses, which according to Foucault split the author-function in the

\textsuperscript{2} We know from Kingsley’s own accounts that bits of her journals and correspondence found their way into this book, and there is textual evidence to suggest that many of the lectures she gave on her return to Britain (to institutions as diverse as the Cheltenham Ladies College, Manchester Chamber of Commerce and the Royal Geographic Society) also did.
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is therefore not unreasonable to ex-
pect Mary Kingsley’s text to be a site of conflict between them.

Broadly speaking, we can identify three main discourses in this text: the
scientific, the narrative and the confessional. Some could perhaps be subdi-
vided: within the confessional voice, we can perhaps distinguish passages
that appear to have been written as on-the-spot notebook jottings from diary
entries that were composed later, upon reflection (see below); and the scien-
tific passages could also be subdivided according to whether the author ap-
ppears to be addressing an informed layman or a scientific specialist. There are
also passages that are hybrids, in the sense that they contain elements of
more than one discourse. However, owing to constraints of space, I propose
here to simplify the matter and restrict my analysis to relatively straightforward
eamples.

The discourse that corresponds to much of the last part of the book
(Chapters 7, 9, 10, 11) is formal, learned and often didactic in tone. It contains
all the characteristics that we commonly associate with scientific style: imper-
sonality (achieved through structures such as the passive voice, verbal con-
structions with ‘it’, a general absence of modals or any other device revealing
the subjectivity of the author, etc); denotative use of language; technical vo-
cabulary, etc. Indeed, in places (e.g. Ch. 9, on ‘the Wild West African Idea’),
the structure of the chapter even seems to recall the format still used today in
research papers, involving a definition of terms, reference to the work of
recognised authorities, a case-study, etc.

As regards attitudes to race, in these sections of the text, there is almost no
empathy with the native, who is reduced to a ‘specimen’, to be observed and
analysed in the interests of knowledge. One clearly feels the influence of the
current fashion for taxonomy and Darwinism:

one continually sees magnificent specimens of human beings, both male and fe-
male. Their colour is light bronze, many of the men have beards, and albinos are
rare among them. The average height in the mountain districts is five feet six to
tive feet eight, the difference in stature between men and women not being great.
Their countenances are very bright and expressive, and if once you have been
among them, you can never mistake a Fan. But it is in their mental characteristics
that their difference from the lethargic, dying-out coast tribes is most marked.
(143)

The terminology Kingsley uses to refer to the natives also reflects the preju-
dices of the age: “The difficulty of gaining a true conception of the savage’s
real idea is great and varied.” (160) In these ‘scientific’ passages, the author is
not recounting her memories but, in true scientific mode, abstracting from
them, drawing generalisations that are presented as having the authority of
timeless truth (an effect largely due to her use of the universalizing present
tense and the subsuming of the individual observing eye into the generalised
‘one’ or ‘you’). Consequently, maximum distance is created between herself
and the natives she is describing. It is in passages like these that Kingsley comes closest to the discourse of the Victorian sage.\(^3\)

The prevalent discourse in the *Travels* in quantitative terms is probably lighthearted narrative, which occupies much of the central part of the book. The tone is entertaining and informative and makes extensive use of anecdote. The style is subjective (personal pronouns, modals, etc), with use of the narrative tenses (past simple, past perfect, past continuous) and narrative textual organisation (essentially chronological). There is also some use of suspense devices, dialogue and irony. In these passages, Kingsley’s memories of particular events are staged in such a way as to have maximum effect upon her readers, and humour is achieved through a deliberate ironic echoing of other familiar discourses. For example, there is an episode during her stay in a Fan village, in which she comes across a bag in her ‘bedroom’ emitting a strange smell:

> I shook its contents out in my hat, for fear of losing anything of value. They were a human hand, three big toes, four eyes, two ears, and other portions of the human frame. The hand was fresh, the others only so so, and shrivelled. 

Replacing them I tied the bag up, and hung it up again. I subsequently learnt that although the Fans will eat their fellow friendly tribesfolk, yet they like to keep a little something belonging to them as a memento. This touching trait in their character I learnt from Wiki; and, though it’s to their credit, under the circumstances, still it’s an unpleasant practice when they hang the remains in the bedroom you occupy, particularly if the bereavement in your host’s family has been recent. (115)

This tale is recounted in such a matter-of-fact tone, so devoid of any kind of horror on the part of the narrator, that its shocking content is highlighted. This blasé narrator persona is achieved by a very deft and subtle use of language. Her prose echoes the language of society ladies, as in the affected delicacy about unpleasant smells and death, and the ‘concern’ for the sensibility of others (“this touching trait”, and “if the bereavement in your host’s family has been recent”), and the effect of this is to throw the two situations into relief, emphasising difference through an ironic similarity.

A similar device is used in the following passage, when Kingsley is describing a very special character she meets on the voyage:

> While engaged in shouting ‘Encore’ to the third round, I received a considerable shock by hearing a well-modulated evidently educated voice saying in most perfect English:

> ‘Most diverting spectacle, madam, is it not?’

> Now you do not expect to hear things called ‘diverting spectacles’ on the Rembwé; so I turned round and saw standing on the bank against which our canoe was moored, what appeared to me to be an English gentleman who had from some misfortune gone black all over and lost his trousers and been compelled to replace them with a highly ornamental table-cloth. (149)

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\(^3\) It is the discourse of the Victorian sage that perhaps best embodies the patriarchal, imperialist perspectives of the day. It is extensively described by John Holloway (1965).
The ‘you’ in the fifth line of this quotation clearly implies a complicity between the narrator and narratee, who are associated in English surprise at this encounter, a complicity that is reaffirmed at the end of the episode with the use of the word ‘home’:

Obanjo evidently thought him too much of a lavender-kid-glove gentleman to deal with bush trade, and held it was the usual way; a man got spoilt by going to Europe. I quite agree with him on general lines, but Prince Makaga had a fine polish on him without the obvious conceit usually found in men who have been home. (150)

‘Home’, like any other relational word, alters its referent according to the point of view adopted: ‘home’ to the author refers to a very different geographical location to ‘home’ from the point of view of Prince Makaga, which is different again to that of Obanjo, and it is salient that here, the narrator is not identifying with the Africans but with her narratee. This distances her from her subject, who becomes a character on a stage watched by narrator and narratee alike.

Even more interesting is the way that the narrator, during this episode, also becomes a character in her own narrative. The narrator thus has a double role; without relinquishing the blasé persona of the storyteller/explorer addressing her English narratee, she also takes upon herself the manners and voice of Prince Makaga’s interlocutor:

Taking a large and powerful cigar from his lips with one hand, he raised his hat gracefully with the other and said:

‘Pray excuse me, madam.’

I said, ‘Oh, please go on smoking.’

‘May I?’ he said, offering me a cigar-case.

‘Oh, no thank you,’ I replied.

‘Many ladies do so,’ he said, and asked me whether I ‘preferred Liverpool, London, or Paris.’

I said, ‘Paris; but there were nice things in both the other cities.’

‘Indeed that is so,’ he said; ‘they have got many very decent works of art in the St George’s Hall.’

I agreed, but said I thought the National Gallery preferable because there you got such fine representative series of works of early Italian schools. I felt I had got to rise to this man whoever he was, somehow, and having regained my nerve, I was coming up hand over hand to the level of his culture when Obanjo and the crew arrived, carrying goats. (150)

A dual effect is achieved largely through the manipulation of direct and indirect speech. Whilst the former technique gives the impression of a tableau in which actors are uttering pre-rehearsed exchanges for the benefit of an audience, the second creates a distance and locates the main locus of interchange in the interaction between the narrator and the audience she is addressing. The transition between the two modes is effected neatly through the use of free indirect discourse, in the line, “I said, ‘Paris, but there were nice things in
both the other cities”, which allows her to slide back neatly into her other role in the line beginning “I agreed”.

How are we to regard the way the natives are being remembered in these narrative episodes? Is there empathy, or a distancing typical of the colonialist? On the one hand, it is clear that these passages are a great deal more personal and subjective than the examples of scientific discourse given above, and as a result, the natives achieve a much greater degree of humanity. There also seems to be an awareness of the non-essential nature of social roles, which is of considerable ideological import. However, the irony that is constantly present in these narrative passages has the effect of opening up a distance between the narrator and her subject, and the use of novelistic devices such as direct and indirect speech, not to mention the narrative tenses, effectively fictionalises the experience. These are memories that have been called into the service of a story, and as such, have undoubtedly been shaped and arranged for maximum effect.

A number of passages in Travels in West Africa do not conform to the norms of either narrative or scientific discourse but seem instead to be somewhat confessional in style. According to Sarah Mills, there were considerable pressures upon women in the nineteenth century to produce private confessional types of discourse, and so many of the journals and letters produced at that time, she claims, are in reality not simple reproductions of journals or letters to families: “in many of the cases the women wrote the texts in the form of journals because that was the convention of the times. Many of them had not kept journals and therefore the journals are fictional inventions after the fact.” (Mills 1991: 110) This contrasts with Mary Kingsley’s own comments about the diary form, however. Alison Blunt, in a footnote to Chapter 2, tells us that Kingsley found it necessary to justify including extracts from her diary,

being informed on excellent authority that publishing a diary is a form of literary crime. Firstly, I have not done it before, for so far I have given a sketchy resumé of many diaries kept by me while visiting the region I have attempted to describe. Secondly, no one expects literature in a book of travel. Thirdly, there are things to be said in favour of the diary form, particularly when it is kept in a little known and wild region, for the reader gets therein notice of things that, although unimportant in themselves, yet go to make up the conditions of life under which men and things exist (Kingsley quoted from Blunt 1994: 88).

Kingsley’s distinction between a diary itself and the ‘sketchy resumé’ of the contents of one no doubt accounts for the distinction that I have perceived (see above) between on-the-spot notebook jottings, made in situ to record thoughts and impressions before they were forgotten, and more reflected diary entries that appear to have been composed later, perhaps in the evening after the day’s activities were over.4 Indeed, I would suggest that there

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4 It seems unlikely to me that these extracts are deliberate attempts at creating a particular effect. The change from past tense narrative to the present tense seems too abrupt and
is a *discourse continuum* present here that ranges from the unstructured almost 'stream-of-consciousness' style of the 'on-the-spot' jottings through the more self-aware style of the reflected diary entries and personal letters on to the narrative discourse that we have just discussed, in which there is the clear presence of a constructed narratee.

The confessional style of the *in situ* diarist is the least frequent in quantitative terms, and indeed occurs only occasionally, in the form of isolated passages inserted into sections of narrative text (mostly in Chapters 8, 12 and 13). Despite this lack of prominence, I am going to give considerable attention to some of these passages, as this is the most intimate of all the voices in the text and the one that is likely to offer the greatest insights into the 'precollective, preofficial individuality' that Said refers to in the quotation above. An unexpected shift from the narrative past to the present tense is what, to my mind, indicates the patching of two quite different discourses. Such an example occurs on page 153:

The off-shore breeze blows strong this morning and the tide is running out like a mill-race, so the Lafayette flies seaward gallantly. Libreville looks very bright and pleasing – with its red roofs and white walls amongst the surrounding wealth of dark green mango trees; but we soon leave it behind, passing along the front of the low, rolling hills, all densely clad with forests [...]

The use of the present tense here is clearly not for dramatic effect, coming as it does after the factual and informative tone of the previous paragraph. The deictic phrase ‘this morning’, combined with the use of the present continuous (‘is running’) clearly suggest that these sentences were written *in situ*, and that they represent Kingsley’s visual and auditory impressions, as she sits in the boat sailing along.

The Lafayette flies along before a heavy sea, and from my position at the bottom of her I can see nothing but her big white mainsail and her mast with its shrouds and stays standing out clear, rocking to and fro, against the hard blue sky; and just the white crests of the waves as they go dancing by. I have nothing to hear save the pleasantest sounds in the world – the rustle of the sail and the swish of the waves as they play alongside the vessel. Now and then there is added to these the lazy, laughing talk of the black men; and now and then an extra lively wave throws its crest in among us. (154)

These sentences are the nearest one gets in the *Travels* to Mary Kingsley’s unconstructed perceptions, and as such, they constitute interesting evidence of her private view. In the first passage quoted above, the use of ‘we’ is revealing. It appears to be an utterly unconscious grouping of herself with her crew in a personal pronoun that suggests an erosion of the ‘them and us’ mentality typical of the colonial era. For the moment, at least, Kingsley is not aware of any barriers separating her from her crew; they are common hu-
manity, sailing along through the natural world in a quasi-meditative state of oneness and tranquillity. However, this state of oneness and empathy is not sustained, however. In the final sentence of the second of the quoted passages, the word ‘black’ hits our modern sensibilities with a clout; it is clearly redundant, since there is no distinction to be made between them and any other men of any other colour. I would suggest that this is an occasion where Kingsley allows the language to take over and form her personal perceptions (in the manner described by Said). Indeed, it might be reasonable to assume that she would have written ‘blackman’ as a single word, as was common in the nineteenth century (reflecting the notion that a black man was not merely a ‘man who was black’, but some distinctly different entity that warranted a noun to itself), and that the separation into adjective and noun may be the work of a politically-correct modern editor.

Another interesting example of this discourse is to be found at the beginning of Chapter 5:

I own I did not much care for these Ajumbas on starting, but they are evidently going to be kind and pleasant companions. One of them is a gentlemanly-looking man, who wears a gray shirt; another looks like a genial Irishman who has accidentally got black, very black; he is distinguished by wearing a singlet; another is a thin, elderly man, notably silent; and the remaining one is a strapping, big fellow, as black as a wolf’s mouth, of gigantic muscular development, and wearing quantities of fetish charms hung about him. The first two mentioned are Christians, the other two pagans, and I will refer to them by the characteristic points, for their honourable names are awfully alike when you do hear them, and, as is usual with Africans, rarely used in conversation. (92)

The presence of the diarist is signalled once again by the use of the ‘going to’ future in the first line, which has a deictic function, situating the moment of discourse in time. What is striking about this passage, and the paragraphs that follow, is that we almost lose sight of the fact that she is speaking about natives; indeed, by the time we get to the description of Gray Shirt’s house on the next page, an inattentive reader may be under the impression that Gray Shirt is a white colonialist. This merging of identities is achieved by the emphasis upon characteristics that stress the individuality of the men; they are described as ‘gentlemanly-looking’, ‘genial’, ‘thin’, ‘elderly’, ‘silent’, etc, none of which are stereotypical adjectives for natives. The clothes are presented as

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5 It might be useful to compare this with a parallel passage from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, in which the black crew of the ship are described through the perceptions of the white narrator, Marlowe. Although *Heart of Darkness* presents itself as a work of fiction, it is not unreasonable to assume that Marlowe is expressing the ‘typical’ white colonialist viewpoint. “It was unearthly, and the men were – No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.” (51)
distinguishing features, much as they might be if Europeans were being described; and, paradoxically, the two references to colour (“a genial Irishman who has accidentally got black, very black” and “as black as a wolf’s mouth”) are presented as unique, distinguishing features on the level of the other adjectives, rather than as generalised markers of Otherness. This passage is a world away from the prevailing attitude of the colonialist, who sees natives as an undifferentiated mass of black otherness; these men are presented first and foremost as people.

This, then, to my mind suggests that, in *Travels in West Africa*, we are confronted with a situation not dissimilar to the one described by Edward Said in the passage about Marx, in which the author’s private perceptions are ‘sullied’ by their passage through language. Only in those rare moments when the social mask is allowed to slip, those few passages in which Kingsley seems not to have taken the trouble to ‘dress up’ her prose for some imagined or real addressee, are we privy to what she might really have experienced.

2. Discourse and memory

So what does this exploration of Mary Kingsley’s discourse in *Travels in West Africa* tell us about the workings of memory in general and about the relationship between discourse and memory in particular? First and foremost, it seems clear that, as has so frequently been asserted, memories are not merely retrieved from some mental storehouse but are actively constructed in the process of linguistic encoding. From this brief examination of one aspect of Mary Kingsley’s memory, namely her recollections of racial difference, we have seen that she cannot be easily pinned down to any one ideological position. Rather, her memories take different forms according to the discourse she assumes at any one moment. When she dons the coat of the scientist, her African hosts, guides and bearers are construed as specimens to be observed and analysed with little or no awareness of any shared humanity; when she enters story-telling mode, they become the butt of her irony, caricatures created to enhance the complicity that she actively builds with her narratee; yet when she slips into a more confessional mode, characteristic of the passages I have considered as ‘on-the-spot diary jottings’, we can sense an element of empathy with the natives, a rare ability to transcend the rigid racial categories of the day.

Secondly, it would seem that distance might be a useful concept to mobilise in this analysis of the relationship between discourse and memory. Distance may be constructed discursively in a number of ways. In the case of fictional representations, devices such as narrative (past) tenses, direct/indirect speech, irony, etc open up a space between the here-and-now of the reader, or indeed the writer, and the described event.6 In the case of scientific

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6 Cf. for example Toolan (1988).
discourse, there is a reconstrual of primary perception (by means of grammatical metaphor, technical terminology, etc.) into a form that is no longer congruent with perceived reality.\textsuperscript{7} Linguists have long accepted that there is a relationship between discursive distance and \textit{social distance}. This means that a text that is being written for a more formal social context (such as a lecture or scientific paper) will necessarily demand a more elaborate and distanced discourse than one that has been produced for informal consumption (such as private correspondence).\textsuperscript{8} This alone might be enough to account for the different construals of racial difference that we have noted throughout the \textit{Travels}.

There may also be a relationship between the degree of discursive distancing employed in particular sections, and the \textit{temporal and spatial distance} between the experienced event and the telling of it. That is to say, passages in which the experience and the telling coincide in time and space (those I have called the on-the-spot diary jottings) are also the most immediate and congruent in discourse terms; while those that have been penned later, upon the author’s return to England, are more constructed, and consequently present a more socially conditioned vision of racial difference. It may be that the immediacy of the pre-social perceptions recorded in the confessional passages is somehow lost with the passage of time and upon physical displacement, and that this inevitably leads to a resurgence of received notions and conventional prejudices. This is a matter of great potential interest to the study of memory and one that clearly needs to be further researched.

Consequently, I would tentatively suggest from this analysis that there may be some process at work in Kingsley’s \textit{Travels in West Africa} not unlike that described by Said in the passage from \textit{Orientalism} quoted above. Certainly there does appear to be a gap between the author’s primary perceptions of the racially-different Other, as revealed in the relatively unconstructed diary jottings, and the attitudes that she manifests elsewhere in the text; and I have argued, with Said, that this is due to the socially constructed nature of the different discourses that she adopts. This would seem to confirm the conclusions long reached by scholars of autobiography and related subjects that memory is ultimately more about reconstruction than mere retrieval. It also undermines the notion that individual recollections are subjective; what we have learned, if anything, from our examination of the narrative passages of this text is the extent to which these accounts of remembered incidents are collaborative; that is to say, they result less from the author’s private perceptions than from her attempts to gain the complicity of

\textsuperscript{7} Cf. Halliday (1993) on scientific discourse. A discourse that is congruent with our primary perceptions of reality will construe things as nouns, processes as verbs, etc. Scientific discourse, in contrast, is highly constructed and incongruent, in this sense.

\textsuperscript{8} Indeed, it might be interesting to trace the progressive distancing that occurs in the discourse continuum I outline above; in these cases, one of the most important determining factors will be the addressee, and the relationship of that addressee to the author.
her addressees by staging the scenes in a language that would be familiar to
them.

As regards scientific discourse, there is much work to be done, it seems to
me, upon the process by means of which the individual observation or ex-
perience becomes abstracted into universal ‘fact’ (a process which we have
seen in operation, to some extent, in this work). This, of course, leads us once
more into the field of collective memory; for what are specialist discourses if
not edifices of remembered knowledge, in which new representations are
inevitably encoded in terms of something that has gone before?9

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* This work has already been started by the linguist Halliday and his associates in Halli-
day/Martin (1993).