Technical Communication: a Two-Sided Coin?

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One Starting Point: *The Two Cultures*

“In our society (that is, advanced Western society) we have lost even the pretense of a common culture. [...] This is serious for our creative, intellectual and, above all, normal life.”

C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (1959)
Outline

1. Technical Communication after World War II
2. Analyzing Technical Documents with AntConc
3. Confronting the Results with Linguistic Theories
4. Using Cognitive Psychology to Understand T.C.
5. Conclusions
1. Technical Communication after World War II

Since WWII, T.C. has been shaped by:
- the military and its standards
- economic productivism +
- rationalizing processes
- computer science (medium +
  languages)

Checklist for Little Boy bomb charge
aboard Enola Gay (1945) ©Atomic
Heritage Foundation
2. Analyzing Technical Documents with AntConc

Corpus:
- Adobe FrameMaker 12 User Manual
- Articulate Storyline 2 User Manual
- Juniper Secure Access 7.0 Admin. Guide
- MindManager 2016 User Guide
- Caplio 500SE Software User Guide
- Oracle VM VirtualBox User Manual
- Oracle Balanced Scorecard Install Guide
- Corel VideoStudio Pro X7 User Guide 4
- Avast Antivirus Home Edition 4.8 User Guide
- Atlassian JIRA 6.4 User Guide

Users’ feedback
Main traits:
- **brevity**: syntax + terms
- **simplification**: procedures + terms
- **redundancy**: structures + syntax + terms
- **illustrative diversity**: changing codes/mediums to clarify a point

Adobe FrameMaker 12 User Manual
AntConc word analysis
3. Confronting the Results with Linguistic Theories

What T.C. shares with the language of bees:
- goal-oriented production
- context-dependant codes and signs
- non-ambiguous signs
- redundancy

Ethologist Karl Von Frisch
©GettyImages
3. Confronting the Results with Linguistic Theories

In T.C.:
- the referent-symbol link prevails;
- the abstract reference is secondary.

Ogden and Richards’ 1923 semiotic triangle
3. Confronting the Results with Linguistic Theories

T.C. performs 4/6 functions:
- referential
- phatic
- conative
- metalingual

Jakobson 1958 Factors and Functions of Communication
4. Using Cognitive Psychology to Understand T.C.

Tech users simultaneously perform 5 tasks:
- conceiving the pursued goal + maintaining it in the working memory
- encoding the instructions
- encoding the features of the device
- considering the whole device + setting up an action plan while summoning previous knowledge
- carrying out the task

(based on Franck Ganier, 2001)
Technical communication is based on:
- science + technology
- concision
- clarity
- focus
- univocity

It is both a tool and a specific discourse about specialized fields.