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A Model for Text Comprehensibility

➢ Transdisciplinary approach

➢ Raising language awareness

➢ For „lay people" and experts

➢ Qualitative context analysis

➢ Quantitative text optimization

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A **transdiciplinary** approach to text understanding and text optimization is useful
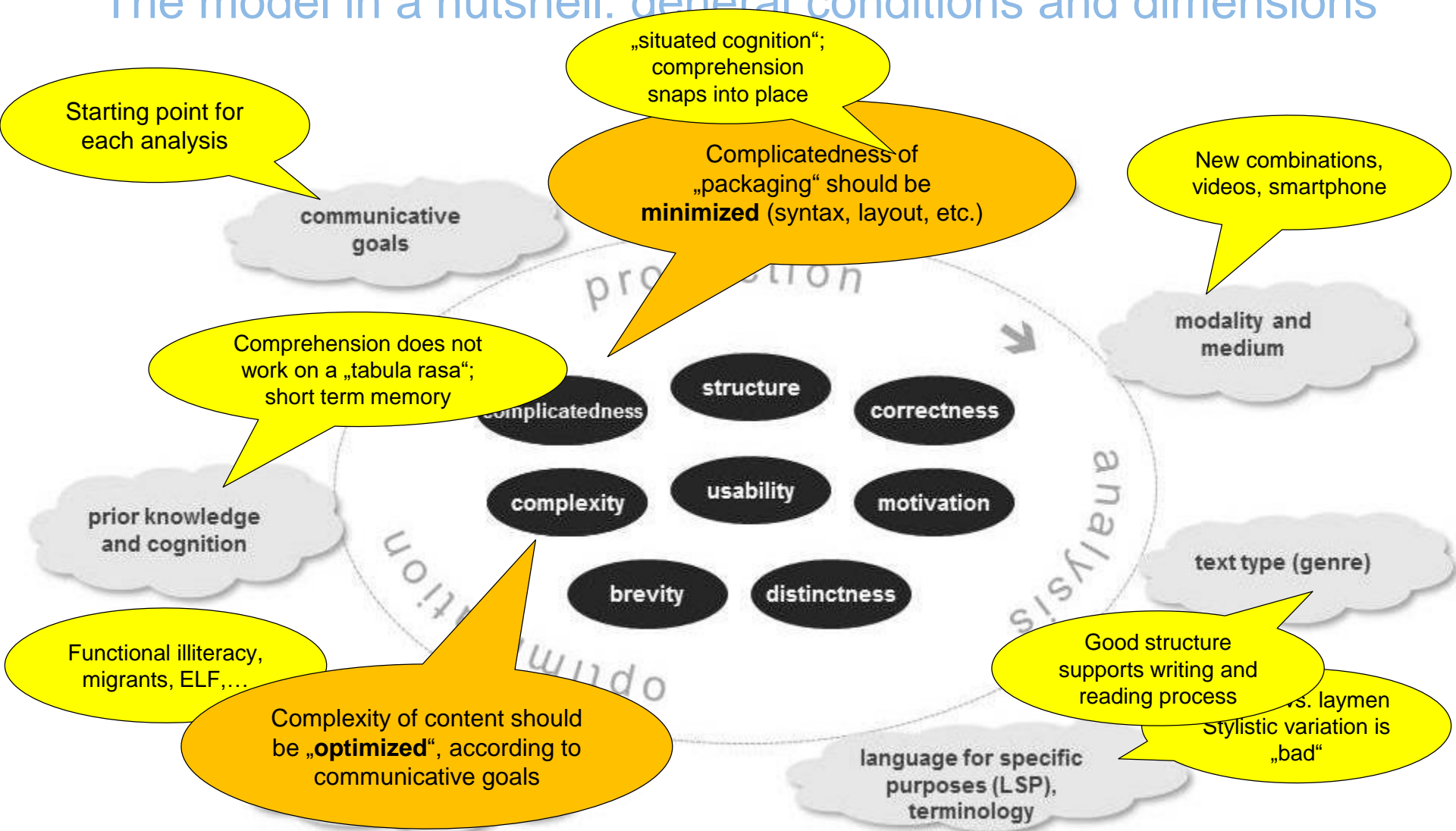
➢ Different disciplines contribute to this topic (= ***inter***disciplinary)

- Applied Linguistics: Text Linguistics, Languages for Specific Purposes, Terminology, Technical writing…

- Cognitive Psychology, Cognitive Science

- Information Design, Graphic Design

- Usability Engineering, Ergonomics

➢ Involvement of writers and readers (= ***trans***disciplinary)

- Comprehensibility is not only a property of texts as artifacts

- Text understanding is highly dependent on prior knowledge, linguistic competence, concrete interests and situations

- Writers should be „empowered"; get „help for self-help"

Language awareness of writers is paramount

➢ People with a **professional education in writing** are a relatively small group (translators, technical writers, linguists…)

➢ Most people who write „**texts for readers**" do not have a professional education in writing; and many of them fear grammar, are weak in explicit grammar rules

➢ Goal: **Raise language awareness** with little linguistic terminology

- Typical difficulties in text understanding (e.g. sentence length, syntactic complexity; overall structure of texts…)

- User centered writing; appropriate text types for communicative goals

- Importance of terminology, esp. in languages for specific purposes (LSPs)

- …

The model in a nutshell: general conditions and dimensions

"situated cognition"; comprehension snaps into place

Starting point for each analysis

Complicatedness of "packaging" should be **minimized** (syntax, layout, etc.)

New combinations, videos, smartphone

communicative goals

Comprehension does not work on a "tabula rasa"; short term memory

modality and medium

prior knowledge and cognition

structure

correctness

complicatedness

complexity

usability

motivation

brevity

distinctness

text type (genre)

Functional illiteracy, migrants, ELF,…

Complexity of content should be "**optimized**", according to communicative goals

Good structure supports writing and reading process

vs. laymen Stylistic variation is "bad"

language for specific purposes (LSP), terminology

Recommendations how to apply the model

1. Context analysis: **general conditions, qualitative approach**

➤ Which communicative goals are important (for you, for the readers)?

➤ What does the exact reading situation look like?

➤ Which modes of presentation and which media are applied; are there alternatives?

➤ Is the genre (text type) stable and familiar to the readers; suitable for the content?

➤ LSP/terminology: which depth is necessary/reasonable/acceptable?

➤ What about the linguistic competence of readers (international environment, migrants, children,…)?

➤ What level of pre-existing knowledge can be expected, are there specific cognitive strains?

Recommendations how to apply the model

2. (Current and) target profile in the 8 dimensions, **quantitative rating approach**

Simple quantification of strengths and weaknesses,
5 step model works well (-2, -1, 0, +1, +2)

Advisable: first working alone,
then discussion/adjustment in small groups

Discussion is more important than
"correct grades"

3. (Re)write the text

Rating profile for sample text

	current profile	target profile
complexity	+	0
complicatedness	+	- -
brevity	0	+
structure	+	++
distinctness	+	+
motivation	-	0
correctness	++	++
usability	+	++

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Backup slide

Tentative answers in the discussion about "plainness"

Structure is clearly defined (restricted subset of standard lg)

Goals of communication, target groups,…
Influence of specific LSPs (terminology, genres,…)
→ Choice of more or less complex linguistic means

Structure is clearly defined („Duden")

easy-to-read

Plain continuum: „simple" - „citizen friendly" - „hard-to-understand"

standard language/s

„translation"
for very specific target groups
(2 texts: original + simplified)

„optimization"
for broad target groups
(1 text: original text is reformulated)

Important border, e.g. for „legally binding" texts (laws, verdicts, decrees…)