

## Discoursal Hermeneutics: Interpretation of Verbal and Non-verbal Texts

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to bridge between "hermeneutics" as the theory and practice of interpreting texts, and "discourse analysis" as the study of the mechanism of how senses (context-oriented meanings) are formed in different contexts. To do this, reviewing hermeneutics and discourse concepts, it will focus upon the main constituents of any instance of interpretation, and through some examples, it will show how each constituent as a meaningful element of certain discourse may influence interpretation.

Keywords: Discourse, hermeneutics, interpretation, text, context, author, understander, interpreter.

### هرمنوتیک گفتمانی: تفسیر متن‌های کلامی و غیر کلامی

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### چکیده

در این مقاله تلاش می‌شود میان "هرمنوتیک" به عنوان نظریه و راهی برای تفسیر متن، و "تحلیل گفتمان" به عنوان نظریه ساز و کار شکل‌گیری و ساخت معنا در بافت‌های مختلف ارتباط برقرار شود. به این منظور، پس از مرور دیدگاه‌های مربوط به آن‌ها در هرمنوتیک و تحلیل گفتمان، عناصر تشکیل دهنده اصلی هر تفسیری معرفی و توصیف خواهد شد و با ارائه مثال‌هایی نشان داده خواهد شد که هر کدام از این عناصر تشکیل دهنده یا سازنده معنایی در گفتمان‌های متفاوت می‌تواند در تفسیری که از متن در ذهن خواننده (خوانشگر یا مفسر) شکل می‌گیرد تأثیر بگذارد. به طور کلی می‌توان این عناصر سازنده و تأثیرگذار بر معنا و تفسیر متن را در چهار عنوان کلی ارائه کرد: ۱- متن؛ ۲- بافت (بافت بلا فصل، بافت کلان)؛ ۳- تولیدکننده (مؤلف)؛ و ۴- فهمنده (بازتولیدکننده/ تفسیرگر).

کلیدواژه‌ها: گفتمان، هرمنوتیک، تفسیر، متن، بافت، مؤلف، فهمنده، تفسیرگر.

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## Introduction

Hermeneutics, to a large extent, attempts to do a general thing: it has been, and is still trying to discover how humans interpret texts. As Weinsheimer (1991:1) puts it: "Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation. Its province extends as far as does meaning and the need to understand it. Hermeneutics names no particular method of interpretation or coherent body of theory that could be expounded in systematic form." It was once used as exegesis to interpret sacred texts to find the "exact" and "correct" meanings of the texts which were supposed to be the "intended" meanings of their Author. In a turn of a period, however, hermeneutics was inclined more towards philosophical issues, and less to practical acts of interpretation via analyzing texts in grammatical and contextual terms. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher in the outline of his 1819 lectures suggested that understanding itself had become problematical and was in need of assistance: "strict interpretation begins with misunderstanding". Now, it can be said that the act of hermeneutics has become problematical as well: hermeneutics has gone too far philosophically, tending to suggest diversity and plurality.

Historically speaking, in hermeneutics, there are different instances of extremities. Sometimes the author's intention(s) or the meaning(s) of the text is believed to be the true understanding. For example, Schleiermacher believes in 'correct interpretation' which requires a regulated re-creation of the creation based upon implicit rules of language to determine what the author meant in the specific text (see Weinsheimer 1991:3-4). He, therefore, stresses the 'text' itself and the intention of the author. Emilio Betti (1962) and Edmond Gustav Hirsch (1967), following Wilhelm Dilthey, suggest that the interpretation might be more valid if Bower values or meanings of the interpreter than the author's are present into it. While the former (1962: 35) emphasizes the autonomy of text, and suggests that we should suppose that it has something to say which we know nothing beforehand, and its meaning is independent of our understandings, the latter recognizes two distinct aspects of interpretation: the intention of the author, which is the 'Bedeutung' (meaning); and contemporary understandings in different contexts, which is 'sense' (Sinn). But he favors Bedeutung as objective meaning of the text. These two concepts are similar to Betti's 'Bedeutung' and 'Bedeutsamkeit'.

Sometimes the readers/interpreters in different cultures/contexts are introduced as the expressers of diverse understandings and consequently, interpretations/meanings. Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (Eng. trans. 1989) suggests that interpretation is 'translation'. He, following Ludwig Wittgenstein, suggests that interpretation is like a 'language game', because we take part in it. He sees interpretation as the process by which one's own 'horizon' of language is fused with that of another and thereby expanded. He also underlines 'cultural tradition' as influential in understanding. He, therefore, supposes a dialogue between the past (author's) and contemporary horizons,

putting aside a monolingual interpretation based upon author's intention (This might be compared with Bakhtin's "dialogism" and Kristeva's polyphony).

On the other hand, discourse analysis, as Brown and Yule (1983:X) suggest, "includes the study of linguistic forms and the regularities of their general principles of interpretation by which people normally make sense of what they hear and read." It is the expansion of semantics - the study of meanings in almost decontextualized words, phrases, and sentences; it overlaps with more modern theories, rather than classic, of semiotics as well. Kress (2001: 183) says that discourse is used with some different but connected senses: 1) pointing to a meaning such as "extended stretch of language"; 2) pointing to social organization of contents in use. Here, both concepts are taken into account.

However to study interpretation as a discursal/discursive practice, all influential participants must be seen. Some linguists, when describing "context", specify some elemental features of each instance of discourse. John Robert Firth (1957), borrowing Malinowsky's term of "context of situation" (1935), refers to the followings:

1. The relevant features of participants: persons, personalities.
  - a) The verbal action of the participants.
  - b) The non-verbal action of the participants.
2. The relevant objects.
3. The effect of the verbal action.

Hymes (1962) refers to addressor, addressee, topic, setting, channel, code, message-form, event, key, and purpose. And Lewis (1972) introduces an index of the co-ordinates determining the truth of a sentence: possible-world, time, place, speaker, audience, indicated discourse, previous discourse, and assignment.

However, as Sasani (2003, 2004) puts it, it is possible to introduce all influential features of each discourse in the form of four main parameters: 1) the text itself in any form, including linguistic texts, media, artworks, and more recently virtual, electronic, digital texts; 2) the producer as the speaker, writer, author or artist - absent or present; 3) the interpreter/understander as a reader, viewer, listener, etc; 4) and last but not least, the spatiotemporal context of, or context of situation as Malinowsky (1935) calls it, or 'chronotope' to borrow Bakhtin's term (1938/1981), or '*maqâm*' to use a Muslim concept. In what follows, these four main features will be described and exemplified.

### Text

Text is the most linguistic element of interpretation. Paul Ricoeur (1981:145-6) believes that "a text is any discourse fixed by writing. According to this definition, fixation by writing is constitutive of the text itself... a text is really a text only when it is not restricted to transcribing an anterior speech, when

instead it transcribes directly in written letters what the discourse means." Brown and Yule (1983:6), however, present text "as a technical term, to refer to the verbal record of communicative act." Accordingly, it may take different presentations (different sizes of paper, in one or two columns, etc), or may be in different types: spoken or written.

De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 3) write about text "as a communicative occurrence which meets seven standards of textuality". These seven standards are as follows: cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality. These are 'constitutive principles', but there are three 'regulative principles' as well: efficiency, effectiveness, and appropriateness. As for the first two constitutive principles, Halliday and Hasan (1976) and Halliday (2004) instantaneously come to mind. Notwithstanding, we are tempted to see similarities between Halliday's coherence and *rabt* or *irtibât* (relevance) and *monâsebât* (pertinence) in the works of Zarkashî, Jalâl al-Dîn Suyûfî (d. 911 AH/1505 AD) Fakhr al-Dîn Râzî (for more information, see Mir 1993).

However, de Beaugrande and Dressler's standards sometimes are at odds. Standard seven, for example, renders the following example a text:

RESUME SPEED

because previously, you may have seen a road sign telling you:

SLOW DOWN, ENGAGE A LOWER GEAR

Standard one, however, says it is a 'non-text', or at best, is silent.

From a semiological perspective, nowadays, a text is defined as anything which participates in a signifying act and can communicate with its audience/understander(s) to produce meaning(s)/ interpretation(s): written or oral verbal text; sign language; musical, cinematic, architectural, visual artwork; or even the most ordinary things. Of course, text could be extended to include verbal or non-verbal, artistic or non-artistic, real or virtual texts. Text, thus, "is the means of realizing non-material social meanings, in language or in other representational modes. *Discourse* is social; and text need not be linguistic" (Kress 2001:183).

Each text, however, has its own specific *structure/construction* based on the specific *relations* between its *constituents*. 'Abdulqâher Jurjânî in 'Asrâr 'Al-Balâgha calls this construction "*nazm*" or system (for a comparison of his views and contemporary criticism, see Abu Deeb 1979).<sup>1</sup>

It might be helpful to remind oneself that in more contemporary, especially conceptual forms of art such as 'auto-destructive art', 'performance art', 'video

1. A Persian translation is also available: Abu Deeb, Kamal. 2005. *sovar-e khiyâl dar nazariy-ye jorjâni*. Trans. Farhad Sasani & Farzan Sojoodi. Tehran: Markaz-e Motâle'ât va Tahqiqât-e Honari.

art', 'environments' etc., and in many virtual, digital media, underlying the flexibility and dynamicity of text, is metamorphic, and takes variable transient forms, structures, and appearances.

### Author

Text is not self-producer, and so needs an 'author', unless it is a 'cyber text' in which the processor and users sometimes take the place of the author. By author, we are reminded of a writer, a speaker, an artist, or in general, a 'text-producer'; a *constituter* who *constitutes* both *constituents* and their *construction*. The author's part in the total meaning(s) of a text or in other words, its interpretations, however, varies according to what kind of author (s)he is. It is better to say interpretations vary according to what kind of text (s)he constructs.

In some literary, artistic and/or sometimes virtual texts, the author seems to be 'dead', to use Roland Barthes or Paul Ricoeur's term; here, context also takes different chronotopes. Ricoeur (1981:147) writes: "sometimes I like to say that to read a book is to consider its author as already dead and the book as posthumous.... The author can no longer respond; it only remains to read his work." Due to this fact, the author can be "the first reader". Here, Ricoeur's words cover any written text. It seems, however, that a 'posthumous text' best fits literary/poetic/artistic text, the constituents and constructions of which are more open to different interpretations. Here, the author's intention(s) is (are) of less significance.

A thumb-nail categorization of text based on their interpretive characters might be these two: author-oriented texts, and deauthorized texts. The former includes dialogical or semi-dialogical, dynamic texts such as conversations, digital chats, or lectures - in a dialogic text, both the author and the other side are more or less present, or in a state of pseudo-presence. For example, consider the following conversation:

*kinetic subtext*: X (author) pouring water into the kettle, turning on the stove to boil it.

*first interpretational subtext*: Y (interpreter) *Wanna make tea?*

*author's verbal subtext*: X 'corrects' Y's interpretation based on his intention *No, old boy; I am gonna boil water for the car.*

*second interpretational subtext*: Y *Are you gonna pour it into the battery?*

*author's verbal subtext*: X 'corrects' Y's interpretation *Battery is full; I wanna wash away sulfate accumulated on the plates of the battery.*

As is obvious, in a conversation, and by extension in an internet chat or similar situations, the understander who is one of the sides of a dialogue and may change has/her position according to the other side, change its

interpretation constantly to adapt it to the intention of the speaker, here called 'author'.

The latter, deauthorized texts, consist of written or more specifically texts with a primary aesthetic function, or "poetic" function to borrow Jakobson's term. Somewhere in between, there are texts such as scientific or non-metaphoric, non-aesthetic texts, which are 'text-centered': the meaning of the text is as important as the meaning intended by the author, which is supposed to be included in the text itself.

In a religious text such as *the Qu'ran*, interpreters try to understand the intention of the original author, here God. Their method, however, is different from that of participants in a conversation: exegetes try to re-construct the original context (*sha'n-e nozul* or '*asbâ-e nozu*'), resort to an Imam's interpretations and other legitimate interpreters', and to analyze the text (verses of the *Qu'ran*) by means of lexicology, etymology, morphology, syntax, semantics, rhetoric, etc. in order to approach the best interpretation of the 'holy text', but in a conversation, the context remains the same. In texts with an aesthetic primary function, however, the intention of the author might be less significant than the recipient's expectations. Here, firstly, the author is already absent. Secondly, paradigmatic and syntactic constituents of text allow a freer manipulation of meaning. Consider the following poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892):

#### The Eagle

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.  
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,  
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

In the above poem, no specific person, time and place is referred to. It is supposed to be read as a poem. However, if you place it in different contexts, and so re-contextualize it, and if different readers with different frames of mind - i.e. preunderstandings - read it, numerous interpretations will be possible. It might be interpreted as a poem about a high-hovering eagle; a national or religious martyr; a brilliant intellectual, .... Based on the theory of cognitive linguistics developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1987), and Lakoff and Turner (1989), it can be said that MORE IS UP, LESS IS DOWN, and by extension, UP IS GOOD, DOWN IS BAD. As a consequence, any positive quality might be interpretable from the poem "The Eagle".

Consider *Sleepers*, a video-art by the renowned Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami at the 2001 Biennale di Venezia. It portrays a life-sized sleeping couple projected on the floor. The projection relies on a soundtrack of street noises that causes certain occurrences to take place within the couple's dreams.

Here there are some simple constituents: a sleeping couple just moving now and then, accompanied with pseudo-natural street sounds, but projected on the floor when visitors of the exhibition are moving back and forth. What is the meaning? Let us say, what are the meanings? Is it possible to find the intended meaning of the artist? Or you may find as many intended meanings as visitors, and as many meanings as the number of looking's at it, even by a single visitor?

### Context

Context is influential in the formation of interpretation. It can be divided into two parts: micro-context, and macro-context. Micro-context is the instant chronotope or immediate spatiotemporal circumstances. Yule and Brown (1983: 27) write that context is where:

a piece of discourse occurs. Some of obvious linguistic elements which require contextual information for their interpretation are the deictic forms such as *here, now, I, you, this* and *that*. In order to interpret these elements in a piece of discourse, it is necessary to know (at least) who the speaker and hearer are, and the time and place of the production of the discourse.

Macro-context overlaps with culture, cultural tradition, or history reflected in culture. Context is also influential in determining the orientation of interpretation: author-oriented interpretation or deauthorized interpretation. In the former, either the context of the interpreter is either the same as the context of the author, or the interpreter tries to simulate the original context mentally, and in this way, re-contextualize it. During a conversation, context continues to remain the same, but this is not the case for an internet chat. In interpreting a religious text, the exegete tries, or at least (s)he is supposed to understand the intention of the author - e.g. God; so (s)he probably attempts to reconstruct the original context, which in Muslim exegetic tradition, it is called '*sha'n-e nozul*' or '*asbâ-e nozul*' - circumstances of descending or revelation of the verses of the *Qur'an*.

Cultural tradition, i.e. macro-context, is also effective in the categorization of texts. Although constituents and construction - paradigmatic axis and syntagmatic axis - urge us to decide what kind of text the text is, cultural tradition is more forceful. In the so-called 'traditional Persian poetry', for example, standard, fixed prosodic features such as meter (*bahr-e 'aruzi*), rhyme and alliteration are as important as semantic manipulations such as metaphor.

*Bud bâzargân-o 'u râ tuti'i*  
*dar qafas mahbus zibâ tuti'i*

There was a merchant who had a parrot  
It was locked up in a cage, a beautiful parrot it was

*Chonke bâzargân safar râ sâz kard*  
*su'ye hendustân shodan âqâz kard*

Since the merchant decided to travel

To start his trip toward India

*Har qolâm-o har kanizak râ ze jud  
goft bahr-e to che 'âram, guy zud*

From every steward and stewardess, generously

He asked: "what may I bring you? Tell me quickly."

... (From "the story of the merchant and the parrot", Mowlavi)

In modern Persian poetry, however, semantic manipulations are much more important, and usually no clichéd prosodic meters are used.

*Qor'ân bâlây-e saram, bâlesh-e man 'enjl, bastar-e man torât, va ze bar  
Pusham 'avestâ, mibinam khâb:  
Budâyi dar nilufar-e' âb.*

The Qur'an being on the top of my head, my pillow being the Gospel, my  
bed being The Torah, and my body

Covered with the Avesta, I dream up:

A Buddhist in the *nilufars* (blue water lilies or lotuses) of the water.

... (From "Shuram râ" ("My Excitement"), Sohrâb Sepehri)

This is a piece of significant evidence to prove the effectiveness of cultural tradition in determining text's type.

### Interpreter/Understander

Last but not least, the interpreter, or simply any understander, is, especially recently, focused on from different aspects, and the overwhelming burden of interpretation is almost totally put on his (her) shoulders; It should be kept in mind that cultural issues are also influential just through understanders. His (her) share in interpretation is referred to by diverse terms: 'pre-understanding' (Rudolf Bultmann 1957), 'horizon of the present' (Hans-Georg Gadamer 1989), 'ideology' (in critical linguistics, e.g. Kress and Hodge 1979), or even more linguistic terms such as 'presupposition', 'frame' (Minsky 1975), 'script' (C. K. Riesbeck and R. C. Schank 1978), 'scenario' (A. J. Sanford and S. C. Garod 1981), 'schema', and 'image schema' (G. Lakoff 1982). Here, 'understander' is used as a cover term for any reader, hearer, translator, critic, artworks beholder, or visualizer of cybernetic texts. In fact, it is the understander who does interpret texts; the one who lives and experiences in a specific cultural tradition; who is located in a specific space and interprets a text in a specific time; who starts interpreting text with his (her) 'pre-understanding' - pre-judice, pre-knowledge, pre-experience.

### Concluding Remarks

In different cases, different arrangements of four the interpretational effecters are possible. There are, therefore, arguments for a discursual hermeneutics used in any textual, and situational instance of interpretation, including four main



parameters, one or more of in different circumstances and arrangements, come(s) to the forefront and play(s) a major role. Here, a generality is apparent, but at the same time, numerous variegations seem to be at work within this unity. This sounds to be a paradox, a contradiction, but it is a real 'unity-despite-plurality'.

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