

## What makes a text a text?

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Before we consider the 'why' of text analysis, it is worth considering what makes a text a text and why our definition of the text as a unit of analysis is something that matters. The text as a unit of analysis is a concept that we often take for granted in our research. One of the reasons that we take the notion of text for granted is that we assume it is obvious, because text is most often associated with a product, with something that has clear boundaries and physical tangibility. As long as the printed page is your text, it might seem that it is not necessary to be concerned with boundaries. But even here, is a text in a paperback the same text as in a hard-cover edition? What about the paper quality? What about the font? The same text on a kindle? Once you step outside the printed page, the notion of text becomes even more challenging.

In my own research I most often look at multi-participant and multimodal interaction in context, which means that the question of establishing the boundaries of text becomes very apparent. The challenge is that when you are looking at interaction in context, the difference between text and the context of the text becomes very fuzzy and this is even more true if that interaction is multimodal. This matters, because text is often defined as language functioning in context and context is defined as that which is beyond the text. Since this is a circular definition, considering what makes a text a text matters.

Defining his position on language Halliday (1978:10) writes that "it might seem that one could hardly begin to consider language at all without taking account of social man, since language is the means by which people interact. How else can one look at language except in a social context?" Though he goes on to suggest that there are many different vantage points on language depending on the questions one chooses to ask, he favours the view of language as a social semiotic. Viewing language as a social semiotic requires consideration of context, and to look at context we need a notion of text.

Halliday (1985:10) defines text as "language that is functional", where *functional* is used to mean serving some purpose in context. So context and text are in

this view intimately connected.<sup>1</sup> We must work with both to get a picture of either, a relationship that Martin (1999) refers to as ‘the inherited dialogism’ of text/context that comes with the social semiotic view of language.

Taking a social semiotic view of language leads to a number of interrelated questions that must be considered; firstly, what does it mean to say “a text” (unity of structure)? secondly, where does a text start and finish (boundary conundrum)? thirdly, what counts as the context of a text (fuzzy boundaries)? If it is important to consider the whole text, then our first challenge is to define what a text is and where it begins and ends. While context may be said to potentially contain everything, text may not. For a text to be considered a text, it must have boundaries and these boundaries help to define the limits of context (see Wegener 2016 and Bowcher & Liang 2016b for a more complete discussion).

Building on the idea of text as language that is functional, Halliday & Hasan (1976: 23) suggest that “a text is a passage of discourse which is coherent in these two regards: it is coherent with respect to the context of situation, and therefore consistent in register; and it is coherent with respect to itself, and therefore cohesive.” This concept of coherency is picked up in Hasan’s (1985: 52) description of text as a unity of structure and texture. The unity of texture is measured through the concept of cohesive harmony (see Hasan 1985: 96), but unity of structure is more difficult to operationalize.

To conceptualize the unity of structure, Hasan (1985) uses the notion of generic structure potential and the relationship to the contextual configuration. By contrast, Martin (1999) draws on Gregory (1967) and Gregory & Carroll (1978) and their notion of ‘functional tenor’ or ‘global purpose’ to develop a genre approach to the structure of a text. As Martin (1999: 27) suggests, “the notion of global purpose seemed to give us a nice handle on text”. Martin (2001: 61) also argues for a “modular perspective on text organization, which places cohesion analysis within a broader framework for analyzing discourse.” Neither Hasan’s nor Martin’s approaches operationalize ‘unity of structure’ and indeed in order to define either generic structure or global purpose, it is necessary to posit the existence of something to which generic structure or global purpose can be assigned to and this suggests that there is a unit beyond text to which these concepts apply.

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1. For an excellent discussion of the relation between text and context in functional approaches see Ghadessy (1999).

## Text and the boundary conundrum

As linguists, when we consider text it is generally as a product (however, for perspectives on a dynamic view of text in context see O'Donnell 1999; Ventola 2005; Bateman 2008 amongst many others). To say that we are most often concerned with product is not to say that there is no picture of the process. In considering text as product, we are building on a fundamental grounding in text as process. However, there are both theoretical and practical reasons why we typically comment on product and not process.

Firstly, as Halliday (1985: 11) suggests, if we are to comment on a text as process we are relying on our understanding of text as product. Because of the relationship between text as product and text as process, to be in a position to make any meaningful comment on the text as an unfolding process it is necessary to understand the system which produced that process and that system is a system of products.

Secondly, for very practical reasons, the text is more likely to be studied as a product because this is how we are able to handle it. A text is recorded, written, filmed or otherwise made into a product of some sort for the purposes of sharing, analysing, and storing. A slice of social process is made static for the purposes of our analysis and it is not just within linguistics that it is necessary to break the subject of analysis into manageable units. The text is just such a unit. It is, as Halliday (1985: 10) describes it, "a semantic unit". Texts are carved out of the ongoing flow of social process. Text, if we can use the term for social process, has boundaries and a fixedness only to the extent that we give it boundaries (Hasan 1995: 187).

## The fuzzy boundaries of text and context

If context refers to what goes with a text, and a text is to be seen as a semantic unit that is language functioning in context, and this text is to be viewed as both product and process, then just as what counts as text will vary, what counts as context will also vary depending on our point of view.

At some points, surrounding text will form the context (see here the concept of co-text, Catford 1965: 31 and Halliday 1999), at others the economic or cultural system/structure will form the context. Indeed, in most cases text as process will form the context for text as product and analysis should typically be done with the two perspectives in mind (Halliday 1985 and further discussion of this variability in Halliday 1999). Bartlett (2016) introduces the useful notion of "textualisation, the immanent production of coherent language", which allows us to model text production in action. Textualisation provides a useful space between text as product and text as process. By avoiding the binary, we can explore the social action as both the process and the end result.

## Text as artefact, evidence and exemplar

In examining text, we must also consider our reason for looking at a specific text. Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) suggest a distinction be made between looking at text as artefact, or text as evidence. As linguists we may examine texts for either or, more probably, both these purposes. Indeed, we can say that the notion of text is integral to and shaped by our analysis. To the distinction between artefact and evidence, Martin & Rose (2007:313) add the further notion of text as exemplar.

### Artefact

If we consider text as artefact, then we are treating the text as important in its own right and as the object of our analysis. Text as an artefact is typically a text that already has established boundaries and recognisable status as an existing text. Such texts typically have design and motivation and can be considered to have a definite start and end point or existence as product prior to investigation. These are most often the texts that we consider as verbal art or as valued text-types within society (e.g. the works of Shakespeare or the essay).

### Evidence

While we may consider such texts as important in their own right we may also use them as evidence for something else. We may for example use them to tell us something about social values, an individual, about ideology or about history and context. When we look at a text as evidence, we are considering it as part of an argument and most likely as part of a social activity or process that does not itself have clear boundaries and unambiguous functional motivations (see for example Wegener's 2011 discussion of ambiguity in the structure and functional motivation of the Medical Emergency Team call as a social process).

### Exemplar

Text as exemplar is another way of considering the functional motivation of text production. Martin & Rose's (2007) inclusion of exemplar as a motivation for text production allows us to explain incomplete texts that have been created for the purposes of explaining or instantiating. In these situations, we can create texts that are otherwise unlikely to have ever existed, that is, they will have no contextual or textual likelihood. These are not the only functional motivations for texts, but they offer three very different ways of looking at text.

## Conclusion: Perspectival variance in the notion of text

The functional motivations for a text often vary according to the perspective of the participants involved. Berry (2016:187), in her discussion of context of situation, states that she is “concerned with how the speakers and writers construe contexts and how they respond in the semantic choices they make to the contexts they have construed”. Thus, she foregrounds the need to take the participants’ perspectives into account. Whether it is text production or text analysis, a difference in perspective can extend to differences in the very motivation or purpose for a text.

If we take up Berry’s (2016) notion of text in context, perspective here has a number of different aspects. Perspective may be considered as the reason why we are considering a text/-context, it is also the different perspectives of the participants that are involved in the text/-context that we choose to look at and with whose perspective we, as researchers, are aligned. Perspective is also our temporal and historical location with respect to the text’s creation and the text’s location with respect to the event that triggered the text. As Bowcher & Liang (2016b: 271) argue, it is a text’s “ecosocial environment”, that bestows meaning to the text itself – its role, value, function and affordance”. But it is also our notion of text that defines what counts as the ‘ecosocial environment’. All of these aspects of perspective will shape the boundaries of the text/-context and the relevance of different types of data.

For linguists, language is the object of analysis and the text is data in the form of a unit of analysis. A text forms part of a body of evidence for claims about the semiotic behaviour of an individual or group, the nature of a group of texts or text types. At an even larger scale, a text will form part of a body of evidence for the nature of a language, the linguistic system or more broadly about the social system, be it a point in history, a point in development or within the text itself.

But data is not naturally occurring and never neutral and text as a unit of analysis is bound by the same constrictions. By this I mean that data is an artefact of analysis and is thus subject to the biases and perspective of the theoretical background of the analysis and the researcher(s). Whether it is text as evidence, text as exemplar or text as artefact, text will have fuzzy boundaries for the simple reason that the nature of what counts as text is shaped by the reason whereby we consider it as evidence, exemplar or artefact. It is shaped by the participants involved in the text production and the text analysis – thus the nature of text and context is perspectively variable. The reason why we are looking at a text and the participants involved in the text creation and analysis shapes what we consider a text to be and hence what lies outside the text or counts as the text’s ecosocial context.

So, if we return to the foundations of a social semiotic view of language that we started with; firstly, what does it mean to say “a text” (unity of structure)? What

we call “a text” will be shaped by what our research question is, the social activity that the text is a part of and our purpose for analysing the text. Secondly, where does a text start and finish (boundary conundrum)? Just as with unity of structure, the boundaries of a text vary by perspective. What one participant sees as the beginning and end of a text may be quite different to how another participant sees the boundaries of a text. Thirdly, what counts as the context of a text (fuzzy boundaries)? If the boundaries of the text vary, then what counts as context will vary. The boundary between context and text will also vary between modalities. For all of these questions, the answer itself depends on the questions asked and this should always be made explicit even if it seems obvious.

Finally, why does it matter? The fuzzy boundaries and perspectival variance of text matter not because they are a challenge or because they make analysis difficult. They matter because we need to be able to capture this perspectival variance and fuzziness so that we can begin to understand the complexities of language behaviour in context.

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