On the Notion of Text and Its Boundaries in the Context of Semiotics and Communication

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Abstract

The article presents a terminological analysis of the notion of text in the context of semiotic and communication paradigms to define its boundaries and to disengage it from non-textual semiosis. The objectives were achieved through the application of general scientific methods (analysis, synthesis, description), the semioanalysis following Yu. M. Lotman's methods and also structuralist and, to a certain degree, post-structuralist approaches. While performing the analysis, the author comes to the conclusion that the concept of infinite textualization of the actual reality, which is promoted by a number of post-structuralists, tends to neglect both the complex dialectical relationship and the opposition between the text and actual reality. The article defines the ontological status of a text as a specific conditional reality. Then, differences and similarities between the text, other conditional realities, and the actual reality can be more clearly identified, which is quite important, considering the current post-modernist tendency to blend the text and extra-textual realities. The conclusion is that the main characteristics of the text are ontological conditionality, semiotic property, informativity, communicative nature and origin, the presence of an intentional sender, artificial origin, accessibility for universal perception, coherence, integrity, and completeness. To sum up, I define the text as a semiotic conditional reality generated by a communicative situation with non-degenerated planes of expression and content, and characterized by the unity of syntagmatic cohesion and paradigmatic integrity, certain systematicity, and completeness.

Keywords: Communication, Reality, Semiotics, Sign, Structuralism, Postmodernism, Post-structuralism, Text.

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Introduction

The connection between the text and the actual reality generally understood as extra-textual reality has been studied by many scholars since ancient times. However, it is today when the philosophical discussions demonstrate the trend that can be characterized as 'a turn toward the text'.

The very notion of text has been made into a problem. The term 'text' (from the Latin textus — tissue, weaving, connecting) has become one of the most widely used words in human sciences, thus implying the loss of its monosemy and indicating the urgency of its definition. Contemporary post-structural philosophy assigns such a dominant role to the text that nearly all the phenomena of human existence (sociality, corporeality, sexuality, power, culture, history) are seen through a prism of textuality. The revision process involves standards and criteria for defining borderlines between the text and the actual reality. The problem has become especially pressing with the 20-century-rooted growing ontological trend in contemporary philosophy facing the necessity to create new ways of comprehension of reality.

In the present age, ontology-related subjects are being activated and concretized in philosophical and interdisciplinary studies, which focus on the concept of reality, postulating the idea of multiple realities and the pluralistic approach to their diversity. 'The turn toward reality', which is representative of the contemporary thinking and instrumental in seeing the text as a specific reality, calls for the analysis of characteristics of textual realities as compared with extra-textual realities.

In addition to differences, these realities are characterized by unity manifested and expressed through a human as a subject of communication. Therefore, in the problematic field of our essay, the rationale behind the study is the adoption of the anthropocentric approach to the text and the focus on communication. It has priority significance, as it makes it possible to study the text at the pragmatic level, in correlation with communication participants. Thereby, the study is channeled into the course of the present-day thought, which is increasingly emphasizing the paramount significance of communication.

The present-day situation in text studies is characterized by refocusing from the 'narrow', synchronous perception of the text as an autonomous structural and semantic static entity to its 'broader', diachronous understanding where it is seen as a dynamic system characterized by active interaction of all the communication elements. This shift in priorities demonstrates the response to the approaches prevalent in traditional philology, poetics, and literature when the text was studied in its static condition, in a certain super-temporal dimension.

Thus, the ontological and communicative-pragmatic approaches play a leading role in this study.

Methods of the research

Text studies tend to transcend disciplinary boundaries. Being multi-faceted and comprehensive, our essay incorporates studies by different scholars representing science areas focusing on text philosophy. The semiotic analysis of the relationship between the actual reality and the text was performed by Charles Sanders Peirce (2000), Roman Jakobson (1971), Umberto Eco (1999), Roland Barthes (1968; 1972; 1975) (structuralist and post-structuralist periods), and Vadim Rozin (2001). In a broader context involving a culturological paradigm where culture is seen as a semiosphere, this relationship is studied by Yu. M. Lotman (2005), B. A. Uspenskij (1995), and V. Rudnev (2000). In the study, the author also relies on the works of J. Dunne (1927), M. Buber (1995), D. S. Likhachov (1983), M. N. Epstein, A. A. Genis and S. M. Vladiv-Glover (2016).

The main methods of this study are: comparative analysis, 'semioanalysis' in the meaning given by Yu. M. Lotman, structuralist and, to a certain degree, post-structuralist approaches. Although the methodologies produced by the structuralist and post-structuralist approaches are not uniform as they borrow their techniques from semiotics, linguistics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, they make the text analysis more specific and substantive. Here I rely on works of M. Foucault (1970/2002), J. Baudrillard (1981/1994; 1968/1996), J. Lacan (2002), and R. Barthes (1968; 1972; 1975), while demonstrating the wrongfulness of R. Barthes' absolutization of the text.

Results and Discussion

In the modern era, in the context of the formation of the fifth (after advents of speech, writing, printing, radio, and television) information revolution with the computer and the Internet representing its iconic attributes, the very concept of text becomes problematic.

In recent decades, the term 'text' has been widely used outside linguistics and literature studies. The problem has been aggravated by the fact that both linguistics and semiotics do not set stable borderlines between the sign and the text. While linguistics defines the text as "verbal *manifestation* of a certain semantic series" (Likhachov, 1983, p. 129), semiotics nurtures the idea about non-verbal texts implying all kinds of diverse objects such as geographical maps, theatrical art, cinema and television broadcast information, rituals, religious actions, etc.

Culturology tends to narrow down the notion of text. The text status is not assigned to a cohesive set of signs, unless it has an extra-situational value. Here we deal with two groups of texts. The first group includes non-personal and non-attitudinal texts (outcomes of natural science activity, juridical laws, occupational guidelines and manuals, etc.). Texts of the second group are characterized by personal coloring. These are publicistic texts, essays, memoirs, and fiction works. The culturological perception of the text is characterized by certain limitedness. Firstly, the cultural significance of the text subject to fixation and preservation depends on taste and value preferences. Secondly, as reproducibility is seen as the main feature of the text, live, spontaneous communication having intra-situational significance is removed from consideration. In this respect, the culturological approach to the text as well as linguistic and semiotic approaches tends to see the text as a stable, static, equal-to-itself formation.

To overcome the limitedness of the above approaches we turn to post-structuralism, which offers consideration for the dynamic dimension of the text. However, as it borrows methodologies from semiotics that tends to blur the borderline between the text and the actual reality seeing them as equal semiotic realities, post-structuralism can entail the concept of 'infinite textualization'. It is supported by R. Barthes and J. Derrida who assume that there is nothing outside of the text. Capturing the post-modernist worldview, this radical statement absolutizes the text and indicates the eroding of the criteria of differentiation between the text and actual reality.

There are many factors contributing to this erosion, the semiotic nature of the actual reality being the main contributor. V. Rudnev justly assumes that the actual reality is perceived as asemiotic due to its fundamental semioticity, too excessive to be perceived. Therefore, the actual reality "is nothing other than a sign system consisting of multiple and miscellaneous sign systems or, in other words, it is such a complex sign system that its average users perceive it as a non-sign system" (Rudnev, 2000, p. 180).

This perception can be explained by our tendency to see the sign as a purely linguistic (language) sign, while neglecting the semiotic nature of everyday items (let alone social roles and interactions), which constitute the most essential layer of our daily life. Unlike linguistic signs, they

cannot be reduced to the designation function. They are self-sufficient due to their utilitarian function. Therefore, their ability to act as a designator (a sign) is secondary and optional. Roland Barthes proposes to call these semiological signs, whose origin is utilitarian and functional, sign-functions: "As soon as there is a society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself; the use of a raincoat is to give protection from the rain, but this use cannot be dissociated from the very signs of an atmospheric situation. <…> But once the sign is constituted, society can very well refunctionalize it, and speak about it as if it were an object made for use: a fur-coat will be described as if it served only to protect from the cold. …The function which is re-presented does in fact correspond to a second (disguised) semantic institutionalization, which is of the order of connotation" (1968, II.1.4)

Although early Barthes (1972) deemed it possible to purify 'words and objects' from ideological ('mythological') buildups, afterward he gave up that idea.[2] It was captured in the iconic formula 'denotation is the last of the connotations': Denotation merely pretends to be the primary meaning that supposedly opens the way to a certain genuine nature of objects, thus disguising ideology in the likeness of true nature (Ivleva, 2007). According to late Barthes (1975), social and political reality is intrinsically conditional due to its ineradicable and unavoidable mythologicity. "While traditional myths of the primitive society, as shown by C. Lévi-Strauss and E. Meletinskii, developed fundamental oppositions of culture to resolve the contradictions produced by it, contemporary myths, on the contrary, are intended not to eliminate them, but to naturalize them" (Gilyazova, 2019, p. 18).

J. Baudrillard (1968/1996) emphasizes this idea by pointing out fundamental deformations in the social and economic realm: The driver of commodity production is not demand, but the production that creates demand through pressure of advertising and turns an object into a symbol of the status and success of its owner in the domain of ever-lasting insatiable desire. Being detached from its utilitarian and pragmatic constituent, the commodity becomes a sign, while the sign, in its turn, acts as a commodity. Signs are produced and exchanged, being alienated from their referents whose support they no longer need; they work for their self-reproduction, which can be observed, for example, in formation of the so-called 'virtual economy'. "Once the sign domain or rather the domain of signifiers acquires immanence as well as autonomy, and, as a result, turns into a domain of reality production, then, according to Baudrillard, there comes the age of simulation" (Tyuleneva, 2007, p. 319). Signs are replaced with simulacra, which, when becoming independent, no longer can be seen as totally harmless, despite their 'emptiness' and ostensibility (Baudrillard, 1981/1994).

The semiotic nature of actual reality is mentioned in R. Barthes' works of the structuralist period. The semiotization inherent in the approach may escalate to pan-semiotization (let alone Baudrillard's works provocative in their extremeness), but we should admit the rightfulness of the

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[2] This assumption captures Barthes' transition from the modernist to the post-modernist position. Post-modernism, as a specific way of perception of modern times, brings in a new vision of reality. As Michael Epstein et al. describe, "on the whole, modernism can be defined as a revolution that strove to abolish the arbitrary character of culture and the relativity of signs in order to affirm the hidden absoluteness of being, regardless of how this essential, authentic being was defined… Postmodernism, as is known, directs its sharpest criticism at modernism for the latter's adherence to the illusion of an 'ultimate truth', an 'absolute language', a 'new style', all of which were supposed to lead to the 'essential reality'. <…> The very notion of a reality beyond that of signs is criticized by postmodernism as the 'last' in a series of illusions, a survival of the old 'metaphysics of presence'. The world of secondariness, that is, of conventional and contingent presentations, proves to be more authentic and primary than the so-called 'true reality'" (2016, p. 25).

concept of semioticity and certain simulativeness of actual reality, which makes actual reality similar to other, conditional, realities.

In the meantime, the semioticity of actual reality differs from the semiocity of conditional realities: It can reach the textuality level only in conditional realities. The semiocity of actual reality implies that all its phenomena, both manmade (sign-functions by Roland Barthes) and natural, are able to contain information: They serve as symptoms, heralds of the future (clouds at sunset indicate windy weather) or evidence and features having retrospective meaning (annual rings of trees). Such semiosis is potentially unlimited; however, as Ch. S. Peirce (2000) rightfully notes, it is impossible and unrealizable without and outside of the interpreter. Hence the existence of developed, sometimes quite complex sign systems, to study which we need zoosemiotics, semiotics of architecture, fashion, household behavior, meal, and even scents, etc (Avanesov, 2016; Barthes, 1967, 2006; Lazutina et al., 2016; Lobodanov, 2016; Lotman, 1990, 2005; Tulchinskiy, 2018; Uspenskij, 1995; Vaynshteyn, 2010). Yet, by no means all sign systems are texts.

Assigning the text status to actual reality by virtue of its semiotic nature would appear to be superfluous generalization prompting the idea about deep intrinsic involvement of 'words and objects', which, according to M. Foucault, was representative of the Renaissance period. Moreover, their similarity was not limited to the language domain; it applied to the entire world. The world is an enormous Book where everything is significant and has the meaning that needs interpretation; each phenomenon, by its existence, points at the Supreme Being that gave it birth, at God who wrote this universal Book. Its counterpart is another book – the Bible, in relation to which all the other books are mere interpretations. The ability to interpret becomes fundamental and possible due to the four similitudes (convenientia (adjacency of places, 'convenience'); aemulatio (emulation); analogy and sympathy (Foucault, 1970/2005, pp. 19-27)) that penetrate and link the world together. That time period, witnessing the need for continuous interpretation of the universal Text and the best explanation of its evidence (objects) — signs (words), brought in two sciences constituting the core of all other sciences: semiology and hermeneutics.

It is appropriate to consider not only the ability of the semiotic system to carry information, but also its *communicative* origin. Although there are multiple philosophical schools that see any asset of human culture as a text, I believe that it is methodologically more justified to differentiate artifacts of human activity as well as physical phenomena from texts as such. The point is that the above phenomena are not texts; they are signs; moreover, they are signs-indexes. Their form, according to Ch. S. Peirce (2000), is an effect indicating its content-cause. It is not surprising that being artifacts of culture, products of human activity, evidence[3], symptoms of diseases, and trail, they have crucial significance for verification and justification of hypotheses of investigation or scientific research. However, natural or (if unintended) artificial indexes are still not texts, and outside their interpretation by the researcher, they cannot be seen as signs. Their tangible physical nature inherent in phenomena of objective physical reality literalizes their sign meaning. On the other hand, the same nature that facilitates (and enables) decoding of this meaning can make it difficult to identify the mere sign nature of these phenomena.

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[3] See: "The need for their interpretation as something that serves to infer the existence of something else (aliquid statpro aliquo) makes the unwitting indexes into a variety of signs, but we must consistently take into account the decisive difference between communication which implies a real or alleged addresser and information whose source cannot be viewed as an addresser by the interpreter of the indications obtained" (Jakobson, 1971, p. 703).

Before decoding the sign, it is important to be able to see the sign in the phenomena and their connections.[4]

The task becomes even more difficult when it involves building of a coherent picture from fragmented evidence — the types of tasks criminalists and archeologists have to deal with.[5] Speaking about natural phenomena, it may seem that they can contain information and, therefore, can represent texts or the Book of Nature; however, they occur outside communication and, therefore, cannot be seen as texts. We do not know who and why sent them to us. Are these questions appropriate? The same applies to artificial objects, for example, to ancient tools, which were made for a utilitarian purpose rather than communicating information. They act as unintended indexes rather than texts.

Thus, the *communicative* origin of the text is its fundamental distinguishing characteristic. For example, if we assume that regular radio-frequency signals are sent by inhabitants of a star to make contact, we deal with a *text.* Alternatively, if these pulses have nothing to do with living creatures willing to communicate, then we deal with a strictly physical phenomenon rather than with a signal and a text. This example demonstrates that the communicativeness of a text is not always an apparent characteristic, though it does not reverse its paramount significance. The presence of this characteristic is especially questionable in terms of actual reality. The problem is not limited to detection and justification of the existence of the Creator: Portraying God as the Master and Demiurge (God as 'a watchmaker' in the philosophy of Deism) makes us perceive the actual reality created by Him as a certain 'cultural' artifact, but not a text. To be interpreted as the Text the actual reality must have not only the Master, but the Sender, who would communicate with us as with his addressees through phenomena of the world 'written' by Him (Shutaleva & Putilova, 2014).

The communicative *origin* (not just a communicative property) of the text implies its artificiality and the presence of both the sender and the intention of the sender. It is this origin that sets the boundaries of the text and makes it possible to differentiate texts from *semiosis of the non-textual type*.

The communicative origin of the text means that the information discovered by the interpreter in phenomena of actual reality cannot be seen as a text, as it occurs outside communication (as active intersubjective interaction mediated by signs). Undoubtedly, we can share M. Buber's (1995) idea of the real world as a result of the *dialogue* between man and God, i.e. between the subjects belonging to different modes of existence. In this case, the specified requirements are met: There is communication and there are its active participants. On the other hand, do we always understand the text of this type? Do we perceive it properly?

Besides, there are two alternatives. Firstly, the world can be understood as the Book of Being, as a text, unconstrained, open for the future and unpredictable like our own actions, by which we record its content. Secondly, the world can appear as a recorded text, in which we are characters, puppets submissive to someone else's will and tyranny (the idea of Rock). There can be a third option that combines the two alternatives. I mean the concept of 'serialism' by J. Dunne (1927). He suggests

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[4] Therefore, "smoke as a sign is not similar to smoke as a material *occurrence*… The sign is *not corporeal*; it is the relationship of implication between two propositions… <…> In each semiotic situation, the interpreter recognizes the relationship between the sign and the representative owing to the fact that he knows <…> that, first of all, the same relationship is established between types of occurrences." (Eco, 1999, p. 230).

[5] Experts can have contradictory and completely opposite interpretations regarding the same historical artifacts, even though they were impeccably excavated and well preserved.

that the world should be seen as a hierarchy of levels of existence. These levels should be structured in such a way that the reality of the lower level should be perceived by its observer as reality with an unknown future, while the observer from a higher level would perceive it as a recorded text. It means that even our free will is determined, and the present time is nothing but the shadow of the initially preset and ready-made future. J. Dunne puts God at the top of this hierarchy extending to bad infinity. God knows well that everything is preordained and written in sympathetic ink, which may become visible to us in our dreams and in rear flashes of insight into the future.

The communicative origin of the text also implies accessibility for public perception, a highly important characteristic. In this regard, manifestations of our psychic activity, for example, dreams, cannot be seen as true texts, even if they are interpreted as meaningful messages rather than as forms of life experienced by us in our dream or as projections of our consciousness. It also applies to our fantasies and creative ideas where the authorship (ours) is much more obvious than in the situation with dreams. V. Rudnev (2000) denies dreams the right to be seen not only as a text, but also, and at least, as a sign array on the grounds that they do not have a material substratum. In his opinion, brain neurons cannot act as the above substratum. Therefore, psychic activity, no matter how meaningful and creatively rich it is, basically cannot constitute semiosis. I think that the subject of the materiality of mental processes is too complex and ambiguous to provide clear-cut answers. There is a variety of opinions: According to V. Rozin (2001) and J. Lacan (2002), the human mental domain is initially semiotic. One thing is certain: A person's overcoming of the individuality of his own subjectivity is performed in the form of exteriorization of results of mental activity and needs not so much their semiotization as their textualization through a report, which is clear and understandable to others, even though, unlike standard messages (about non-mental realities), it is not verified by these other people. The text adds an intersubjective dimension to the individuality.

Finally, the semiotic system (including actual reality) can be deemed a *text* only if it is generated during communication that requires the presence of a *conscious* addresser whose message is initially and *intentionally* (not afterward and unintentionally) meant for communication of information to a specific or abstract addressee (generally, a key requirement for providing intelligibility and comprehensibility of the message).

By all means, there can be extreme, not infrequent examples of communication that stopped performing the function of transmitting information: The Harappan scripts that have not yet been deciphered. In this case, the expression plane has been preserved, but its rigidity (invariability) does not provide us with the guaranteed access to the content plane. Alternatively, the access to the content plane can be impeded by transformations experienced by the expression plane: The noise level exceeds the limit, up to which information can be recognized.[6] This kind of communication should not be seen as a full-featured text, though we deal with the phenomena that used to be texts or that are able to acquire the status of text in future.

Thus, we can offer the following definition of a text: The text is *a conditional reality created or being created by a communicative situation* (the addressee can also act as the addresser — in an auto-dialogue), *which has a semiotic property and origin, the non-degenerated expression plan* (requiring a

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[6] In scientific texts, the accuracy of communicated information is of paramount importance; it is achieved through the minimization of technical and semantic noises as well as their consequences. On the other hand, in literary texts, even noise can contain additional information. For example, darkened with time painting by Rembrandt — The Shooting Company of Frans Banning Cocq and Willem van Ruytenburch commonly referred to as The Night Watch (though initially, the artist portrayed the action taking the place during daytime).

physical-sensuous form perceivable by everyone[7]) *and the content plane, and characterized by the unity of syntagmatic cohesion and paradigmatic integrity, certain completeness[8] and systematicity*.

The communicative nature of actual reality as a reality of human social existence determines its dependence on texts as realities generated by the process of communication and, in their turn, dependent on the actual reality, which provides the above process. Certainly, the artificial origin of the text (signifying, according to R. Ingarden, irreducibility of actual reality to the text) does not allow us to qualify actual reality as a text (as is the case with post-modernists), unless we assume that it is written by someone (God?). However, considering the incriminating attitude of post-modernists toward the Author's position (which is not destroyed by them, though they reject its dominance and wholeness), we have no grounds to detect any theological convergence of the actual reality and the text in the post-modernist vision.

Conclusions

It has been concluded that texts and actual reality are uniform in the semiotic nature of their realities. The difference between them is as follows: The text is a conditional, artificially originated reality generated during communication, while the actual reality is *an immediately experienced* reality, the communicative nature of which is not as obvious.

The definition of the text has been given, and the text was defined as a semiotic conditional reality generated by a communicative situation with non-degenerated planes of expression and content, and characterized by the unity of syntagmatic cohesion and paradigmatic integrity, certain systematicity and completeness, due to which the text can be separated from other conditional realities, first of all, from conscious states.

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[7] Therefore, dreams and other conscious states, even though they are initially semiotic, cannot be deemed texts before they are narrated.

[8] In this sense, words, phrases and episodes taken out of a certain context, outside of which they cannot be properly understood, are elements of a text rather than a text.

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