

The problematic separation of text and context: A comprehensive study in textual and cultural interaction

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Abstract---This research addresses a fundamental issue in critical and linguistic studies: the relationship between text and context, and the extent to which a text is autonomous from the circumstances of its production. The study critically examines divergent theoretical approaches. On one hand, schools such as Structuralism and Formalism focused on the text as a closed and self-sufficient linguistic structure, arguing that meaning emerges from the text's internal relations. On the other hand, approaches such as Pragmatics and Cultural Criticism—particularly in the works of prominent thinkers like Edward Said and Michel Foucault—assert that meaning cannot be separated from the complex network of social, political, and cultural contexts that shape and govern its interpretation. Through the analysis of these positions, the study investigates the profound impact of context on understanding literary and communicative texts, attempting to balance the role of a text's internal structure with external factors in the production of meaning. It also discusses the methodological implications of the problematic separation of text and context and its direct effect on discourse analysis. Ultimately, the research seeks to answer a central question: Can an objective reading of a text be achieved in isolation from its context, or is every act of interpretation inevitably

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governed by the reader's horizon and variable external factors, preventing access to a final, stable meaning?

Keywords---Text, Context, Interpretation, Structuralism, Cultural Criticism.

1. Introduction

The relationship between text and context is one of the most complex issues in critical and linguistic studies, forming a central topic of debate across diverse fields, from literature and philosophy to linguistics and discourse analysis. Since ancient times, philosophers and critics have grappled with a key question: Can a text exist as an independent entity, free from the circumstances of its production and historical context, or is its understanding incomplete without considering the surrounding external factors?

This issue extends beyond theory, affecting the practical analysis of literary texts, cultural criticism, pragmatic linguistics, and even legal and communicative studies. Separating text from context may overlook the social, political, and cultural factors that shape meaning, while overemphasizing context could diminish the role of a text's internal structure in producing significance.

The importance of this topic emerges from modern critical approaches that view the text as a site of interaction between language, power, and knowledge, as noted by Michel Foucault and Edward Said. Conversely, structuralist and formalist approaches, such as those advanced by Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, focused on studying texts as closed systems, sometimes disregarding the influence of external contexts on interpretation.

2. Text and Context: Conceptual Challenges and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Defining Text: From Structure to Meaning

The text is a central concept in linguistic and literary studies, and its definition varies depending on the theoretical approach:

- Roland Barthes defines the text as a "semantic fabric in which multiple linguistic elements interact and cannot be understood in isolation from its context" (Barthes, 1988, p. 45).
- Mikhail Bakhtin views the text as a polyphonic discourse, asserting that "every text is formed within a dialogical space where voices and meanings interact" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 78).
- In Arabic studies, Tamam Hassan considers the text as "a complete linguistic unit, governed by a set of syntactic, semantic, and contextual rules that determine the cohesion of its elements" (Hassan, 1994, p. 102).

2.2 Concept of Context: Dimensions and Levels

Context refers to the environment in which a text is produced and encompasses multiple levels:

- **Linguistic context:** concerns syntactic and semantic relationships within the text, where the meaning of a word or sentence changes according to its position in the structure (Al-Jurjani, 1954, p. 54).
- **Social context:** shaped by cultural and historical factors that influence the production and reception of texts (Al-Sakkaki, 1987, p. 89).
- **Pragmatic context:** examines how language is used in specific situations, including the effect of the speaker on the addressee through the text (Al-Taher, 2003, p. 102).
- **Cultural and intellectual context:** studies the ideological and intellectual frameworks influencing text production and interpretation (Al-Jabri, 1997, p. 67).

- Pierre Bourdieu also notes that texts are produced within a "cultural field" shaped by power relations and social norms.

2.3 The Problematic Separation of Text and Context: Theoretical Positions

The relationship between text and context has been a central concern in linguistic and critical studies, raising the fundamental question: Can a text be treated as an independent entity, or does understanding it necessarily require reference to external factors? Theoretical positions have varied, giving rise to several approaches:

2.3.1 Structuralist Approach: Text as a Closed Unit

Structuralists like Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss view the text as an independent structure composed of linguistic signs operating within an internal system of relationships, without the need to reference external contexts.

- Saussure considers language a closed system in which meanings are determined by differences among signs (Saussure, 1985, p. 45).
- Lévi-Strauss applies this concept to literature and myths, analyzing texts as symbolic units that follow hidden structures recurring across cultures (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p. 23).

2.3.2 Pragmatic Approach: Context as a Key Determinant of Meaning

Pragmatic theorists like John Searle and Paul Grice argue that understanding a text depends not only on its internal structure but also on the speaker's intention, production context, and communicative circumstances.

- Grice, in his theory of "cooperative principles," emphasizes that effective communication requires considering contextual factors, such as the speaker's social status, relationship with the addressee, and communicative purpose (Grice, 1975).
- Searle highlights that speech acts acquire meaning according to the circumstances in which they are uttered (Searle, 1987, p. 78).

2.3.3 Hermeneutic Approach: Dialectical Relationship Between Text and Context

Represented by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, this approach views interpretation as a dynamic process influenced by the interaction between the reader and the text's historical and cultural context.

- Gadamer stresses that understanding is historical and involves the reader entering a "hermeneutic circle" linking text and cultural background (Gadamer, 1960; George, 2007, p. 112).
- Ricoeur emphasizes blending interpretation (focusing on textual structure) with understanding (considering cultural and human context) (Ricoeur, 2001, p. 91).

2.3.4 Critical Approach: Context as a Producer of Meaning and Power

Critical theory and postmodern perspectives argue that context actively shapes meaning and governs interpretation, as seen in the works of Edward Said, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault.

- Said views texts as embedded in power structures and cultural discourse, reflecting the West's ideological constructions of the East (Said, 1978; 1995, p. 78).
- Derrida highlights the instability of meaning, revealed through deconstruction (Derrida, 2005, p. 91).
- Foucault asserts that texts are part of discursive systems controlled by power institutions, shaping reality through discourse (Foucault, 1991, p. 67).

2.3.5 Integrative Approach: Dialectical Interaction Between Text and Context

Modern approaches aim to integrate the previous perspectives, emphasizing that meaning arises from the interaction of textual structure and context.

- Van Dijk posits that texts consist of internal (language, semantics) and external (social, historical) dimensions that must be analyzed together (Van Dijk, 2010, p. 56).
- Norman Fairclough notes that meaning is shaped through the interaction of text and context, and texts actively construct reality (Fairclough, 1992, p. 89).

3. Critical Debate on the Problematic Separation of Text and Context

The separation of text and context has sparked extensive debate in literary and critical studies. Different schools of thought have approached this relationship divergently: some focus on the text in isolation, while others argue that context is crucial for understanding the text. This section reviews the major critical schools and analyzes their perspectives and methodologies.

3.1 Russian Formalism: Text in Isolation from Context

Russian Formalism emerged in the early 20th century as a reaction against traditional criticism, which emphasized the historical and social context of texts. The school advocated studying literary texts independently, focusing on internal textual structures and artistic elements.

Key Ideas:

- **Literariness:** Viktor Shklovsky argued that literary value lies in the deviation from ordinary language and the use of artistic techniques such as defamiliarization (Shklovsky, 1975, p. 25).
- **Internal Structure:** Formalists viewed the text as a closed system that could be analyzed through internal elements such as rhythm and imagery.
- **Neglect of Context:** Formalists largely disregarded the historical, social, and cultural context in evaluating literary texts.

Critique of Formalism:

Despite its contributions to literary criticism, Formalism was criticized for neglecting context. Complete separation of text from context may lead to an incomplete understanding, omitting social and political connotations.

3.2 Cultural Criticism: Context as a Central Element

Cultural criticism arose as a reaction against Formalism and Structuralism, emphasizing the importance of context in interpreting literary texts. Texts are viewed as products of the culture that produced them.

Key Ideas:

- **Text as Cultural Product:** Stephen Greenblatt asserts that literary texts reflect the culture of their production, necessitating contextual study (Greenblatt, 1980, p. 45).
- **Power and Discourse:** Michel Foucault emphasizes that texts reflect social power relations and prevailing discourses (Foucault, 1991, p. 12).
- **Contextual Interpretation:** Cultural criticism stresses that text interpretation must consider historical and social context.

Critique of Cultural Criticism:

While essential for linking text and context, cultural criticism has been critiqued for sometimes neglecting the aesthetic and structural aspects of texts. Overemphasis on context may overshadow the internal textual features.

3.3 Post-Structuralism: Deconstructing Text and Context

Post-Structuralism emerged in the mid-20th century as a reaction to Structuralism, rejecting the notion of fixed meaning in texts. Meaning is produced through deconstruction and reinterpretation in different contexts.

Key Ideas:

- **Text Deconstruction:** Jacques Derrida argued that texts do not have fixed meanings; they are polysemous depending on the reading context (Derrida, 2005, p. 78).
- **Changing Context:** Post-Structuralists emphasize that context is not static but shifts according to interpretation.
- **Text as Semantic Network:** Roland Barthes describes the text as a network of semantic relations that transcend linguistic boundaries (Barthes, 1988, p. 34).

Critique of Post-Structuralism:

Post-Structuralism has been criticized for its focus on deconstruction and potential neglect of social and political aspects. Critics argue it can lead to excessive relativism in textual interpretation.

4. Arab Critical Schools and the Text-Context Issue

In Arab criticism, the debate over text and context has also been prominent. Some critics, like Taha Hussein and Mohammed Mandour, emphasized the importance of context in understanding literary texts, while others, like Adonis, focused on internal textual structures.

4.1 Taha Hussein and the Historical Method

Taha Hussein highlighted the necessity of historical and social context in interpreting literary texts. In *Fi al-Shi'r al-Jahili*, he asserts that understanding pre-Islamic poetry requires knowledge of the historical and social circumstances in which it was produced (Hussein, 1926, p. 56).

4.2 Adonis and Poetic Modernity

In contrast, Adonis argues that poetry should be studied independently of context, emphasizing textual structure and artistic elements. Modern poetry, according to Adonis, transcends historical and social context (Adonis, 1971, p. 89).

The critical debate in Arab criticism reflects diverse approaches: some focus on textual structure, others on context. A comprehensive understanding of a text requires integrating both perspectives: the internal structure of the text and the external context of its production.

5. Conclusion

The relationship between text and context remains one of the most complex and debated issues in critical and linguistic studies. Since the early interest in literary and linguistic texts, divergent approaches have emerged: some emphasizing the text as an independent entity, others asserting that understanding is incomplete without considering context. This debate is not merely theoretical but has practical implications for analyzing and interpreting texts in literature, philosophy, linguistics, and even legal and political studies.

Reviewing various critical approaches shows that each school offers a specific vision of the text-context relationship. Formalism and Structuralism focus on internal textual structure, considering the text understandable independently of context. In contrast, Pragmatics and Cultural Criticism highlight the importance of context—linguistic, social, or historical—in shaping meaning. Post-Structuralism offers a more nuanced perspective, seeing meaning as emerging from the dynamic interaction between text and context.

In Arab criticism, the issue has also been widely debated, with scholars like Taha Hussein emphasizing historical and social context, while Adonis focuses on the text's internal features. This diversity reflects the richness of Arab criticism and its engagement with global critical currents while maintaining cultural specificity.

Ultimately, a comprehensive understanding of a text requires integrating the internal structure with the external context of its production. The text is not merely a collection of words and sentences; it is a product of complex interactions among language, culture, history, and power. Attempts to separate text from context may lead to incomplete or distorted understanding, while reducing a text to its context alone neglects its internal structure.

An integrative approach, which considers both linguistic structure and social-cultural context, remains the most effective for achieving a comprehensive understanding. This approach recognizes the dialectical interaction between text and context, providing deeper and more holistic interpretations of literary, philosophical, and legal texts.

In contemporary times, with increasingly complex cultural and political contexts and diverse communication methods, this issue is more relevant than ever. Understanding texts within multiple contexts helps deconstruct power discourses, appreciate cultural plurality, and generate new meanings beyond traditional boundaries. Thus, the study of text-context interaction remains a fertile field for research, interpretation, and creativity.

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